

Greatly Exaggerated

Trinity 1: 29th May 2016

The Centurion's faith

'Greatly exaggerated'

When a newspaper mistakenly printed the obituary of the author Mark Twain, who was still very much alive, he is said to have replied:

'The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated'

Likewise, the press have published the obituary of British Christianity many times over, but are the reports greatly exaggerated?

This last week, a report produced by St Mary's Catholic University in Twickenham showed that the proportion of people defined as 'nones' (that is, people of no religion) now exceeds those identifying as Christian.

At the heart of that shift is that people brought up in the faith, but no longer practicing, are no longer calling themselves Christians.

'Nones'

People leaving the Christian faith is nothing new.

Paul writing to the Galatians notes how many there *are 'deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different Gospel'*. In our own time, people are attracted by many ideas other than Christianity.

But, as one journalist pointed out, it all depends on what you compare it with.

Christianity appears to be in terminal decline if you compare it with the late 19th century revival in religion, but not so much if you compare it with the record lows of the 18th century.

While it is hard to see Christianity, and especially Anglicanism, becoming normative again in the near future, it would be foolish not to see this as part of a bigger picture and cyclical pattern of revival and decline.

As the academic Diarmaid McCulloch said at the end of his series on the History of Christianity:

'It would be very surprising if this religion, so youthful, yet so varied in its historical experience, has now revealed all its secrets'.

A new Apostolic Age

To me, there is something exciting here – we live in a new Apostolic age – ours is a time more like the 1st century, more like that of the first disciples, than ever before.

The re-conversion of Britain means learning to express the Christian faith all over again in ways that are new and fresh and powerful – while still remaining true to the Gospel.

It doesn't mean gimmicks like free wi-fi in churches, or celebrity cameos at Evensong, but it does mean using our imagination, energy and insight to help people to find what it is they are searching for.

The Bishop of London once said that for many people *'Christ is missing and not missed'*. Our task is to make them realise what they are missing.

'He heard about Jesus'

In today's Gospel, the Centurion hears the rumour of Jesus' presence, even from far away, but he did not think he could ask him for help directly.

By entering the house of a gentile, an observant Jew was made ritually impure, and this good and thoughtful non-believer therefore does not go to Jesus – what he doesn't realise is that Our Lord doesn't care about those sort of rules.

How similar is this to so many people in our community, who are good people, who are well disposed to the Church, but do not think that Christ is for them?

The many who do not enter the church out of a mistaken understanding of what we believe or what it involves?

And notice – despite what the centurion says, 'Jesus went'.

And although he sends friends to say *'Do not trouble yourself'*

Jesus still makes the effort.

And the passage ends with Jesus' words:

'Not even in Israel have I found such faith'

The miracle here is not that the slave was healed.

The miracle is that someone so unlikely had such faith in Christ, and no one is to be written off as unworthy or improbable.

Us going to them

What does this mean for us in Barnes?

Over the last few weeks I have delivered a leaflet about St Michael's to every house in this parish. It is to tell them that this church is here for them, no matter how unlikely they think that is.

Incidentally, I also developed an enormous respect for postmen, who manage to deliver our letters despite the fact that some post boxes are almost impossible to find, others are situated almost on the ground (requiring a most undignified position!), and others are so well sprung that posting a letter is a dangerous risk to your fingers!

if they won't come to us, we must go to them.

We must keep the rumour of Christ's presence alive in the community in ways that are surprising and bold. This is not just a job for the Vicar, but something we must all engage with.

When this church was founded in the late 19th century, it was part of an amazing period of Catholic mission in the Church of England. Pioneering clergy and congregations went into communities where almost no-one was interested in the slightest in Christianity and built churches that were soon full to overflowing.

One of my heroes is a man called Fr Dolling who built Saint Agatha's, Portsmouth – but he did much more than that – he went to the people with an acrobatic troupe, a dancing class, a glee club, a sewing guild and a lending library! He went out to the people because he believed that Christ could be found in all people, and everything was an opportunity to teach the Christian faith.

One element of that missionary past still survives at Saint Michael's – high above the main doors over there is a sign that probably most of you have never noticed. It says

'NOTICE!' The seats in this church are free, open and unappropriated, and worshippers are invited to take any seat that is available.

At a time when most people paid for their seats in church with the poor sitting in the cheap seats at the back – here at St Michael's everyone could find an equal place, all were worthy, Jesus was for you, whoever you were.

It is this catholic spirit of mission that we must recapture and exemplify at Saint Michael's – and we are well placed to do it, not only with this beautiful church but also with our Community Centre and Church Hall through which we can engage with people.

'Lord I am not worthy'

Every time we come to Mass we relive the story of the Centurion.

In fact we *become* the Centurion.

As the priest holds up the Body and Blood of Christ, the congregation responds:

'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word, and I shall be healed'.

Every time we say that, we affirm that Christ comes to us – worthy or unworthy – our Lord doesn't mind.

He troubles himself for you and you are to trouble yourself for Him.

What he wants is your faith, and he will come to meet you in the Sacrament.

He will come 'under your roof' and dwell with you.

And if he lives in you, then reports of his death are very greatly exaggerated.

Fr Stephen Stavrou