

SERMON AT THE BAPTISM OF SOPHIE STEPHENS 27.09.09

In many churches up and down the country, today is being celebrated as 'Back to Church Sunday'. Huge efforts will have been made to encourage those who attend Church to bring a guest with them, and for the welcome once through the doors to be as warm as it can possibly be. Some give out specially prepared chocolate bars while others will be offering a variety of styles of worship to make the transition back into Church as easy as possible.

This time last year, back in Bradford, I used a PowerPoint presentation, inter-lacing video clips from our bishop with some very funny U-tube clips from various well known comedians including Mitchell and Webb.

You may well know the sketch where a couple of young twenty-somethings come into an old village Church and meet the Vicar. He is rather severe, to put it mildly and dismisses their barn conversion up the road with a sneer, telling them how they had been noticed poking around in the Church recently. The male partner is obviously quickly put off but the woman is determined to be heard and says that, whilst they go to Church they are broadly sympathetic to what it is all about. She then asks where the nice lady Vicar had gone to as they had rather liked her. The priest is now in full stride, denigrating their 'pick and mix' religion and telling them that all the woolly liberal clergy had been banished. The man tries one more question before the Vicar picks up a cross and chases them out of the Church crying "Be gone, you spawn of the devil!" As the couple manage to close the door, he then asks them why they hadn't put anything into the collection first... !

Funny? Certainly a gross caricature of even the worst kind of 'leave-us-alone-style Vicar'. But it still begs the question, why would anyone want to come back to our churches? What is it that draws Jonathan and Kate back with William for the baptism of Sophie?

Could it be that one of the reasons why people don't come is that they don't find much connection between their ordinary lives and the rather inward looking attitudes they find in all too many of our churches? Shouldn't Jonathan expect, as a city investor, to hear how the Gospel of Jesus relates to his activities at work? Wouldn't he expect us to look at some of the central ethical and moral issues involved? Or in Kate's world as a political analyst, would she not be expecting us to tackle head on, some of the extremely complex debates that reverberate throughout our society today?

For some, of course, these things are irrelevant to Sunday worship. We come to be with God and we do it in a particular way, whatever worlds we inhabit outside. The advantage of this is that we avoid all the controversies that divide people outside our walls.

Yet, in our Gospel today, Jesus' message seems to be about not avoiding debate or the proper airing of differences. When the disciples are anxiously telling him that there are some 'not of the apostolic band', people who are also healing and teaching, Jesus seems to be quite unconcerned: *those who are not against us are for us*. Don't worry about what brand they work for or even what small differences separate us from them: we have far more in common that we have that divide us. 'Accentuate the positive' and don't worry too much about the small things that are just part and parcel of our human diversity.

But there is one general warning that 'Back to Church' Sunday in 2009 seems to have raised via the popular press. Stephen Cottrell, the new bishop of Reading, (who was a colleague of mine until ten years ago) writes in a very easy style and a few of his pithy sayings are to be found in our parish Mission Action Plan. He has hit the headlines again this week by saying that if he were alive today, Jesus would probably have shopped at Aldi.

He writes, even today *I meet people who think you have to be highly educated or suited and booted to be a person who goes to Church.*

That is so frustrating. How did we come to this – that we have become known as just the Marks and Spencer option when in our heart of hearts we know that Jesus would just as likely be in the queue at ASDA or Aldi? The Messiah’s first disciples were down-to-earth people who wanted to know what life was all about.

Perhaps we in the churches don’t like listening to such comments because we believe that there are certain standards that should apply to those who venture through our doors. I have heard a number of people who really do resent being categorised as Waitrose or Marks and Spencer people and who have been very critical of Bishop Stephen Cottrell’s remarks.

But if we think about our normal pattern of shopping, it is hard to throw off such a description completely.

And that, actually, is not the problem. Jesus may well have gone to Marks’ too!

No the comment is not a suggestion that we shouldn’t use these places but that we must do even more to welcome those who don’t have these privileges into the core of our Church life. All Bishop Stephen is saying is that Jesus wants to remind us that, whatever our own tastes, we must do everything we possibly can to welcome (and enjoy) those whose tastes and attitudes are not the same – that is, that we should do nothing that would hinder a ‘child’ (newcomer) from discovering the Kingdom?

As we, each, stand around the Font to act as sponsors, friends and godparents to Sophie, let us do all in our power to find ways of making sure that she – and all her generation – are enabled to find ways that will draw them to enjoy their quest, the long journey of becoming ‘friends of Jesus’.

This sermon was delivered in a shorted form on Sunday 27th September.