

3 October 2010

Sunday 27C

Sermon notes:

2 Timothy 1.1-14

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The Pew Forum is a group in the US which conducts research into questions of the relationship between religious and non-religious interests in contemporary society.¹ It has recently conducted a "religious knowledge survey" which looked into patterns of religious knowledge and understanding across different religious groups. The survey was given to people of all kinds of religious persuasions, and involved questions which tested knowledge of the Bible, of Christian, Jewish and Mormon belief, of world religions and of religion in public life. Overall, it turned out that the groups which performed best across the range of questions were the atheists and the agnostics. Among white protestant Christians, the group which did least well was the mainline believers (which, in our context, is *us*). This group got about half of the questions right. (The atheists did about 25% better). Among "believers" in general, the best group performances came from the Jews and the Mormons. Most of the rest of the details need not concern us now – you can read the much more detailed account on the website if it interests you!

Now, we might be inclined to want to take these results with a grain of salt, not least because they concern a society whose religious history is quite different from ours. But I suspect that similar results might be obtained if something similar were tested here. What brought the survey to my attention was an opinion (blog) piece by Anthony Stevens-Arroyo in the Washington post this week which sought to defend the scores Catholics earned in the survey – white Catholics doing slightly worse than white protestants.² Thus, for example, only about half of the white Catholics surveyed knew the official Catholic doctrine regarding the transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist. Nearly 90%, however, did know that Mother Teresa was a Catholic. And this fed well into Stevens-Arroyo's argument: "Religion is essentially a matter of practical living rather than intellectualized grasp of facts and dogmatic beliefs"; good religion relies "on deeds rather

than on dogma"; "Lived Catholicism is more important [than] knowledge of theological terminology", and "flunking the Pew test is unimportant as long as Catholic America doesn't flunk the faith.

Now, take a moment to reflect upon that – is he right? Is that how you would put it? Does all the doctrine seem unimportant, in the end, compared to the *doing* of belief in good words and deeds?

In our reading from 2 Timothy today Paul exhorts Timothy: "...Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me..." The whole book reflects a concern for "knowing the truth", for careful teaching, and speaks of a coming time when "people will not put up with sound doctrine..." (4.3). "Doctrine" – usually thought of in terms of "dogma" – certainly doesn't have a particularly strong following today, but I don't think that's reason to imagine that our times are "the" times Paul refers to here. The lack of interest in "sound doctrine" is an eternal affliction, and not a prediction which is finally to be fulfilled in this time or that.

But I want to focus briefly today just on making an apologetic for "doctrine" – a defence of why it might be of some use to the average Christian to be able to give an account, for example, of the doctrine of the Trinity, or to understand what is at stake in the ongoing argy-bargy and creation and evolution, or the debates about human sexuality. For, when it comes to religion, a great many of us think with Stevens-Arroyo that all what really matters is "practical living" rather than an "intellectualized grasp of facts and dogmatic beliefs." We find justification for this even in the New Testament, preferring the seemingly "simple" Jesus with his moral lessons to the complex Paul with his theology, when it comes to our favourite texts.

The tragedy in all this is that if we wonder why the churches are empty then we have to look no further than ourselves. If religion is really about good, ethical living, and there are good and ethical people to be found in *and out* of the churches, then we clearly don't need to "go to church" in order to live ethically. Why, then, bother with religion at all? Why bother with Creeds and Confessions – which scarcely anyone can say with a clear conscience, let alone with full understanding? Why not simply "do" the faith, and in this approach, demonstrate that what really matters is not religion at all, but simply good, practical living? This is where the religion of good living leads us – and people in their millions have been led this way. For we can find plenty of advice about practical living on life-style television and other such places, at much more convenient times and for much less expense.

¹ <http://pewforum.org/>

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http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/catholicamerica/2010/09/mother_teresa_and_transubstantiation.html

But my main concern this morning is our received doctrines in general, and why it might matter to understand what they're about. The *problem* with most of the "doctrine" we've received in Christian tradition is that it arose in response to questions which aren't exactly *our* questions or, at least, which we can't see are our questions, and so the doctrines – as resolutions of *other people's* problems – are alien to us. While we recognise, for example, the words one, two, three, person and nature, when they're strung together to speak of one God in three persons, or of Jesus as one person with two natures, we find ourselves in a strange place from which it's a great comfort to be able to flee to a religion of good works and practical living. Or more simply, we wonder about how God can have a "son", without any insight into how that language become part of the church's way of speaking of Jesus, and of God. Simply believing that Jesus is "the" Son of God doesn't get us anywhere helpful except perhaps in the way that rote-learning our time tables helps us with basic arithmetic. If we find we just can't believe what seems to be nonsense, the option of "doing" our religion rather than "intellectualising" it present a very attractive option.

Now, it's not required that everyone be able to do the hard work that is necessary to give coherent accounts of the church's historical faith. We all need to understand, however, that faith is not about believing this thing rather than that, as if all options were lined up and we simply choose this one or that one. We are so accustomed these days to freedom of choice that we easily interpret even believing or not believing in this way. "Practical religion" aids this way of thinking, for while we "must" all be ethical, believing becomes a matter of choice.

Yet faith is not about the things we believe, it is about the things which *cause* us to believe this or that. To illustrate from trinitarian doctrine: this teaching arose because the philosophy of God at the time wasn't flexible enough to account for the church's experience of Jesus. If full justice were to be given to the Jesus-experience, something like trinitarian doctrine was necessary then. When we receive the doctrine of the Trinity today, we don't so much get the "answer" to the question of God, but insight into how we need to allow the story of Jesus-in-Israel to wrestle with our basic thought about ourselves and God.

It's too easy today to imagine that cutting the doctrine of the Trinity somehow gives the uncomplicated Jesus back to us again. All it really does is cut Jesus lose in the sea of ideas and influences which create our world for us and of which we are barely conscious. We might get rid of the difficult-to-believe doctrines about Jesus, but we don't get any better grasp of Jesus. For Jesus is only "ours" when he reveals to us who

we truly are and what already has us in its grasp. The columnist Stevens-Arroyo speaks the truth about where most of us probably finally stand – good practical living as the heart of true religion. That more people lived good, practical lives would be marvellous – and such good lives ought to be highly honoured. But ours is an age which is largely unconscious of its basic drives and motivations – and the church is not immune to this affliction. To focus on ethics and on ourselves as agents with free moral choices is to confess that we don't know just how great are the forces which are hidden from us, and yet hold us very tightly. The type of moral freedom we think we have to think and do the good is where we end up when we lose consciousness of the historical, social and political forces which shape and limit us. The result is quite horrendous, and we see it played out everywhere around us: that only we are to blame for our failures and inability to do the good.

The strange teaching of the church's doctrines and dogmas is the church's attempts, in different times and places, to come to terms with what *does* limit our thinking and actions, and to describe how God has overcome these limitations in Jesus. This is not easy work, but it is necessary if we are to speak the truth in our words as well as in our actions. It is a responsibility of us all better to understand the faith we confess, and *why* it is important to believe these things and not something else. A good life is indeed better than a poorly-lived one; a well-understood life is yet better again.

By the grace of God, may our people's understanding of him and his work for us grow ever deeper and richer and as a consequence, our praise of God grow ever fuller and more joyful. Amen.