

With Gentleness and Respect

Please note that this article is also available as an audio file if you wish to hear it read instead of reading it yourself.

The reading this morning is found 1 Peter 3:13 - 22.

Introduction

I remember reading a letter in the local paper last year that got my attention. Someone had written in complaining, quite stridently, that they believed Religious Education in schools was fundamentally wrong, “very, very, wrong indeed” they exclaimed, and this person was shocked to learn that RE was a also compulsory part of the curriculum.

But the letter was more than just a criticism of compulsory RE in schools, it was in reality, a rant against faith and religion per se. The author exclaimed, and these were the exact words, “surely, in the 21st century, people don’t still believe in goblins, fairies and gods?”

This kind of attack upon religious faith is surprisingly common, and people with little or no knowledge of what Christians actually believe, or what the Bible actually teaches, are joining the ever growing number of those who proudly proclaim themselves to be atheists, claiming that science, as well as common sense, are firmly on their side. Indeed, many atheists make no secret of the fact that they would like to see religious faith finally die out, once and for all. And many of them believe they are well on their way to achieving that goal – at least in the western world, anyway.

I’m reminded of the famous quote of Alistair Campbell, when he was Downing Street Director of Communications, who once said, “We don’t do God”. And as each decade passes, that seems to become more and more true of the majority of our nation as well.

Silver Lining

Yes, I've read a number of Christian articles online recently, that talk about how more people are turning to prayer at this time of crisis; that more people than ever are tuning into online services and watching live streaming of Sunday worship. And that’s all good, and I rejoice in that. Indeed I pray that there really will be a silver lining to the dark cloud this pandemic has brought over the world these last few months. Let us hope and pray that God can use this situation to the advancement of His Kingdom.

However, at the same time we shouldn’t be naive either about the scale of the task that lies before us. We have to be realistic and appreciate just how secular our modern culture is today, how deep it

now runs. Yes, we can all point to successes that the church has experienced, and we all know people who have come to faith - and again, we can rejoice in those things and thank God for them. But, if we are going to make any serious impact on our nation, by which I mean see the percentage of the population who have an active faith actually rise, because the current trend is still downward - then more needs to happen, much more.

Now I don't have an answer as to how that can be achieved. Indeed, other than God Himself, I don't know anyone that does. But a good starting point has to be taking St. Peter's teaching to heart. In verse 15 of our reading today, he says:

"Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect".

Every Christian, indeed all who profess to be a follower of Jesus - me, you, all of us, are going to have to learn to talk about our faith naturally and openly, with the people we meet in our daily lives. That means our family, our colleagues, our neighbours and friends. We each have a personal network of people that we come into contact with on a regular basis, and the majority of them will not active members of any church, of any denomination.

Many Ways

Now sharing our faith appropriately and in a non-threatening way, can be done in many different ways: there's no one correct method; no 'one size fits all' approach to evangelism. Indeed, different approaches will be necessary if we are to reach a wide variety of people. Each of us will have our own particular way of sharing our faith, but, every method of faith sharing will have one thing in common: namely this, at some point you will have to use words.

Most of us are very good at the silent witness: we're good at caring for people and getting alongside them in times of need. We are good at being friendly neighbours, willing to lend a helping hand. This is all very commendable of course and pleasing to God. But in addition to this we must also be prepared to tell people why we have our hope in Christ, why we are followers of Jesus; and we can't do this without using words. As someone once said, we cannot leave people to "guess the Gospel."

Truth to Tell

If we want to communicate the truth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that through faith in Him we can now receive forgiveness of our sins; if we want to communicate the truth that Jesus rose from the dead after three days - then we have to use language. Yes, our silent witness may convince people that what we are telling them is true, but the truth itself must be communicated by the use of words and language.

There are many in our country today, like the person who wrote to their local newspaper complaining about RE in schools, who would like to silence the Christian voice in the UK. But fact is, we've largely silenced ourselves by not sharing our faith; by not talking about Jesus, and so we've done much of their work for them.

Of course, even if we aren't afraid of speaking about our faith (and it is fear in some form or another that holds most people back) we also need to know what it is we are talking about. It's important to understand that we can't share what we don't have, and we can't talk about someone we don't know.

Before we can tell people the reason for our hope, we first must have a hope. So I ask you today: What is your hope? What are you hoping for as a follower of Jesus? Why have you placed your faith in Him? What are you hoping to gain from being a worshipper of God? These are all important questions and before we can speak to others about our faith, we first need to be clear in our own minds why we believe ourselves. Amen.