Sermons for the Christian Year

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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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4th September: 15th after Trinity

MAKING HOLY JUDGEMENTS

By the Revd Michael J. Townsend
Leeds

Exodus 12:1–14; Romans 13:8–14; Matthew 18:15–20

Shortly after moving to a new appointment some years ago, I asked a member of the congregation to which denomination the large and rather forbidding closed church, just along the road from ours, had belonged. Her reply was, 'It belonged to the Strict and Particulars. They were so strict and particular that eventually there was nobody left who was good enough to belong to it.' The contemporary Church, of all denominations, does its best not to fall into that trap.

We place a good deal of emphasis on being open, inclusive and welcoming. We have examined every aspect of church life, from how accessible and friendly our buildings and liturgies are, to the attitudes the congregation displays towards the stranger in our midst. Even in matters of lifestyle we are by and large content to live and let live, unless something turns into a clear public scandal. The cynic might be tempted to say that this is because institutional Christianity in Britain is in such a parlous state that we are not in a position to exclude anybody at all. Deep down we hope and believe that our motives are on a rather different level, even if we might have needed prodding into action by, amongst other things, the Disability Discrimination Act.

Essentially we want to believe that the Church at large, and local church communities in particular, are called to be open, inclusive and welcoming because that is an important way in which we reflect the character of the God whom we worship. And we want to follow the Jesus who, as the Gospels portray him, seems to have excluded nobody except those who excluded themselves, usually through their self-righteousness or lack of commitment. The command of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, that we should not judge other people lest we fall into hypocrisy and are thereby judged ourselves (Matt 7:1–5) is one which we have taken with great seriousness. Any relevant contemporary Litany would surely contain the plea, 'From judgementalism and moral superiority, Good Lord deliver us.'

All of which goes some way towards explaining why we find today's Gospel reading difficult, even embarrassing. It quite clearly envisages some kind of complaints and disciplinary procedure operating within the life of the Christian community and one, moreover, by means of which a member of that community might be subjected to a judgement which has effect not only on earth, but in heaven (Matt 18:18). We are more aware today than we have ever been in the past of how those in a position of authority in the life of the Church have sometimes abused their power, and so this passage might seem to us not just difficult or embarrassing, but morally questionable. So we wonder whether this passage ought not to be read alongside the parable Jesus told about the weeds growing among the wheat (Matt 13:24–30). That too, ends in judgement; but the point of the parable seems to be that it is the judgement of God, not the judgement of human beings.

That, however, might not be the whole story. It might be too easy, an evasion of proper responsibilities. Whilst making all allowances for the danger of the abuse of power, the Christian community cannot entirely escape the responsibility of regulating its own life, not just for its own sake, but for the sake of others who need to be able to find in the Church an institution they can trust. It was not enough for Cardinal Bernard Law, Archbishop of Boston, to leave the final judgement on paedophile priests to God. Failure to take disciplinary action against them has so far cost the diocese over $100,000,000 and the Archbishop's resignation after a lifetime of distinguished ministry, including

front-line support for the civil rights movement. Paradoxically, the failure to judge those involved became, in itself, an abuse of power. There is no possible reason for Christians in other places and other denominations to feel smug or complacent about this. All churches need, sadly, to have ways of dealing with sin and failure within the community.

Today's Gospel reading tells us that this was so from the very beginning and there are other hints of this within the New Testament writings. Paul was evidently prepared to judge a church member who had behaved in a particularly scandalous fashion, and to instruct the Christian community to implement that judgement (1 Cor 5:1–5). Another striking New Testament passage, about not being biased towards the rich and against the poor, is almost certainly set in the context of some disciplinary proceedings within the community (James 2:1–4). So what can we learn from today's Gospel about *how* Christian people should behave when the possibility of judgement and exclusion seems forced upon them by circumstances?

The particular situation which Matthew envisages begins with one member of the church making a complaint against another (Matt 18:15). The Greek text says, 'If your brother sins' which the NRSV in the proper pursuit of inclusive language, paraphrases as, 'If another member of the church sins'. Unfortunately, that doesn't quite catch the force of 'brother' here, and it might have been better to translate, as the NRSV usually does, 'If your brother or sister sins'. The point is that these two people, the complainant and the one complained against, have a spiritual relationship with one another. They are not simply two individuals who happen to belong to the same organization. By virtue of belonging to the Church they are in a brother/sister relationship with each other, and with Jesus (Rom 8:29). This should make a difference to the way in which the people concerned regard each other and it should set a tone for what follows. So what appears as the first stage of Matthew's complaints procedure envisages a private conversation between the two, one believer taking on the difficult responsibility for rebuking the behaviour of another. Since none of us likes having our faults pointed out, even in private, this calls for great grace on the part of the one being rebuked and challenged. Nevertheless, Matthew clearly envisages the possibility that a good and positive outcome will be the result.

Sadly, as experience proves, this will not always be the case. The second stage of the complaints procedure envisages a small group of people from within the Christian community becoming involved (Matt 18:16). The erring church member needs to 'listen' to them, presumably as they reinforce the message that he or she is at fault. Again, the possibility of repentance and forgiveness is held out, but if it proves not to be so, the final stage of the procedure is to be invoked. This involves the whole church being told what has occurred (Matt 18:17), which in this context means the local congregation. If, yet again, the opportunity for repentance is not taken, then it is the whole church which must take the necessary action. The power to bind or loose, previously conferred on Peter (Matt 16:19) is now given to the church, acting together. It is almost certainly the power of excommunication, the right to cast an offender out of the community of faith.

So what we learn from this perhaps slightly distasteful passage is that when actions of this sort become necessary the procedures not only need to be careful and just, they also need to be pastoral. The final judging is to be done by the community of brothers and sisters to which the accused person belongs, not on the whim of powerful individuals within it. And if we ask what all this has to do with our life as a Christian congregation, the answer is – everything! Matthew here offers us a *specific* instance of an important biblical *principle*. It is that there are no solitary believers, we are Christians in community and therefore responsible for one another. We are right to seek to create open, inclusive and welcoming Christian churches. But they also need to be communities where the members are supported, encouraged and sometimes challenged, about who and what they are before God and before other people. That is not judgementalism, it is the pursuit of holiness.

11th September: 16th after Trinity

FORGIVING DISCIPLINE

By the Revd Canon Marilyn McCord Adams
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Matthew 18:21–35

Throughout the Bible, the Bible's God has political aims: to establish and maintain utopia, that ideal

society where individual interest and communal well-being are perfectly integrated, where people can live in good will and harmony with God and one another. So also, and all the more so, in Matthew's Gospel. Heavenly Father is king; John the Baptist, Jesus, and the disciples are Kingdom-heralds. Proclamation must be by word and example. Not only must they announce Kingdom come, not only do they constitute an advance party to evict enemy forces by exorcizing demons; disciples are to embody Kingdom standards in who they are and what they do. In Matthew's Gospel, Messiah Jesus lays down His own definitive interpretation of Torah; in the Sermon on the Mount and other discourses, details the social contract under which the Kingdom of Heaven will be governed. Kingdom standards are higher, even more exacting than those imposed by then-current reform movements. Kingdom citizenship calls us to a righteousness higher than the scribes' and Pharisees'.

Setting up sky-scraping hedges around the law, Messiah Jesus forbids not only murder but anger and insults, name-calling and contempt; not only false witness but any oath-taking at all; not only adultery but lust in the heart, divorce except on grounds of unchastity, and marriage to a divorced woman. Kingdom standards have to be demanding because their aim is utopian. Its citizens cannot rest content to 'do as they're done by'. That would just beget a never-ending cycle of retribution, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. They must advance to the Golden Rule – 'do to others as you would have them do to you'. They must bring recriminations to a halt by turning the other cheek and walking the second mile, by giving coat and cloak as well. To be walking advertisements of Heavenly Father's policies, disciples must reach further, love not only neighbours but enemies, bless those who curse them, and pray for those who persecute and abuse them. As Kingdom heralds, disciples of Jesus must try harder, stretch to be perfect even as Heavenly Father is perfect!

Surely, the God Who created the heavens and the earth should aim high. But when it comes to implementing Divine goals, the Bible's God has a record of choosing unlikely clients – the younger brother, the smallest tribe, a handful of country bumpkins up against the armies of empires, a slingshot against Goliath – so that everyone will be sure to know that the success of the project is God's doing. The God of Matthew's Gospel is acting out the same policy: the evangelist knows it, and Matthew's Jesus knows it. Where the Kingdom of Heaven is concerned, standards of discipline are out-of-reach elitist, but the criteria for admission are snake-belly low. John the Baptist and Jesus preach the same sermon: there is no genealogical requirement (God can raise up children of Abraham from stones) nor qualifying certificate of study or achievement. No character references are required. Rather one becomes a Kingdom-citizen by repentance and the forgiveness of sins!

God's ways are higher than our ways. But the evangelist and his community are on the ground trying to make it happen. God's feisty combination of high and low standards creates problems for human church members and leaders, complications that easily become acute! It's all very well to populate the pews with forgiven sinners. But theology assures us of what experience in any event shows: conversion is not magic. Repentance and the forgiveness of sins do not transform our behaviour and character instantaneously. However sincere our desire to immigrate, we bring with us all those habits that civilized us to the culture that we are turning away from. More fundamentally, we bring with us our animal nature with its built-in instincts, its fight-or-flight determination to preserve individual and kind or clan. Because the Kingdom of Heaven is and has to be so counter-cultural, if it is to organize us for harmonious life with God and one another, we all have to be re-civilized. Immigrants and their neighbours alike know, this is something that doesn't happen overnight!

Put otherwise, it is not as if the Church were giving tennis lessons to people who had never played tennis before. Rather the Church is welcoming onto the team people who have played badly for years, who not only have much to learn but much to unlearn. This means that the repentance for which John the Baptist and Jesus call, the forgiveness of sins which they promise, cannot be a one-time thing. Turning again will have to be a repeated process, a seventy-times-seven daily discipline of acknowledged failures and renewed efforts.

Moreover, the only hope for learners – which is one way to translate 'disciples' – is to stay in school. Counter-cultural Kingdom values have to be taught within the community that shares them, that stretches for them; within groups that coach and cheer lead one another, of two-or-three who take up

Emmanuel's promise to be with them and call on His assistance. Kingdom lessons are so challenging, and we are such slow learners. How can we miss the irony in Jesus' injunction – let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works and give glory to God!

In chapter 18, Matthew's Gospel faces the issue of Church discipline squarely. It begins with a two-fold application of the simile of a child. Childlike humility – teachability, the willingness to learn new ways of being and doing – is a necessary condition for entering the Kingdom and growing up into full citizenship. Patience to receive and nurture the childlike is also a Kingdom-civic virtue required in leaders as in any and all members who wish to be mature. The evangelist reminds, disciples are supposed to be Kingdom heralds, to advertise Heavenly Father's character and policies. Heavenly Father isn't willing to lose even one such Kingdom-learner. Jesus is the Good Shepherd Who would leave the ninety-nine and go out in search of the one that was lost.

Having made these two points, the evangelist considers what the Church should do about someone who falls short of Kingdom ideals. Hypocrisy and cover-up neither teach nor learn. They do not advertise Heavenly Father's ways and means. Church members have a duty to identify offences and bring problems to light. But the evangelist distinguishes two sorts of cases. The second – that of the repentant repeat-offender – is the subject of Peter's question in today's Gospel. The evangelist's analysis, Jesus' answer is that repeated repentance must be met with repeated forgiveness. For repentance shows the offender to be teachable; repeated offence shows how much the offender needs to be taught. For the community not to forgive and stick by the repentant offender, would be tantamount to not receiving the little child as if it were Jesus, to staying with the ninety-nine and letting the lost sheep fend for itself!

Matthew's handling of the first case – of the unrepentant offender – tips the hand of his anxiety about gate-keeping. The unrepentant offender is given three chances. The person is approached privately, then in the company of two or three, and finally before the entire assembled congregation. Repeated refusal to respond to constructive correction from fellow Christians gives evidence that the offender has ceased to be teachable, is no longer willing to stretch and bend towards Sermon-on-the-Mount requirements, to strive to be perfect the way Heavenly Father is. Whereas Peter's question about the repentant repeat offender is rebuked with Jesus' command to forgive seventy times seven, the evangelist here insists on the authority – given by Jesus to Peter and hence to the Church – to bind and loose, and so not to forgive the unrepentant offender. Rather such a person should become to them 'as a Gentile and a tax-collector'!

This ominous verdict reverberates with other threats in Matthew's Gospel: the two-fold warning that Heavenly Father will not forgive us if we do not forgive others; that having been compelled to come into the king's wedding feast from the highways and byways, we will be cast into outer darkness if we have no wedding garment to don; that the Son of Man will be ashamed of us before the heavenly company if we buckle under persecution. This tone of voice drastically alters the picture of Heavenly Father's generosity: sun and rain may be provided to the good and evil, the just and unjust alike; but Divine favour is conditional upon our continuing to tow a very strenuous line.

In general, tightened discipline does strengthen community definition and promote its survival. Ironically, the evangelist's anxious exhortations undermine what they were meant to secure. What we *hoi palloi* need if we are to become persons willing to forfeit possessions, reputation, and life itself for Jesus' sake, is advance confidence that God is for us, that Divine good will precedes, is reliable, to be taken for granted. It is because Heavenly Father is unconditionally generous that we can dare to be generous, not only to forgive fellow Christians, but love our enemies, and take up our cross. The evangelist's pedagogy is inept. Morale for such heroism is built up in us by using the carrot, not the stick! Preoccupation with institutional gate-keeping is unhealthy. Matthew's Jesus warns us not to be anxious. Bringing in the Kingdom is God's responsibility. For God to accomplish Divine purpose, no merely human institution – not the temple, not the synagogue, not the Church – is a *sine qua non*.

Happily, despite the stern passages of Matthew's Gospel, Divine feistiness is not altogether obscured. Does not Matthew's Jesus say that the unrepentant offender should become to the community 'as a Gentile and a tax-collector'? Were not tax-collectors among those Matthew's Jesus left the ninety-nine to seek out and invite? Was it not in relation to them

that Matthew's Jesus reminds: God desires mercy not sacrifice. By tradition, was not one of those tax-collectors, Levi, the evangelist himself?

18th September: 17th after Trinity

THE GOD OF OVERFLOWING GRACE

By the Revd Margaret Forrester
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Exodus 16:2–15; Philippians 1:21–30; Matthew 20:1–16

Many of the stories or parables of Jesus challenge what we call common sense. They turn upside down our accepted notions of what is right and wrong. And often they leave us feeling uncomfortable in case we have to think too much, or change too much, or rearrange the way we live our lives at home or at work or in church. None is more challenging than the one we read today.

The background is the Roman occupation and legislation which drove many small farmers and crofters off their lands. They were forced to join the cheap labour of the unemployed. As I prepared this sermon I suddenly had a vivid memory of my eighty-year-old grandfather telling me when I was about ten of the anticipation of being picked or the humiliation of being passed over at the dock side. He himself had been brought up in a croft in Skye and, being one of a large family, had left to make his way, first in the docks of Port Glasgow, then Devonport and, finally, during the First World War, in Rosyth.

He told me of how glad he was that he was tall and well built. How men would stand shivering with influenza or sick with tuberculosis and try to appear hefty and strong. They would watch the hand of some foreman pick out the strong and tall and healthy looking. Those who were not picked would then rush to the next dock for the next choosing to begin. It was a system that was harsh and crude – making no allowances for health or need or accident. My grandfather spoke with tears in his eyes of the good men who felt humiliated and crushed by a system that treated them like cattle and valued them by muscle – not loyalty or patience or ability.

That sort of system prevailed at the time Jesus told his story. Everyone there would have known that workers were to be hired for the vineyard. It may have been for the pruning or weeding but more likely it was for the precious harvest. They would stand proud and tall, praying to be hired. A contract was then entered into. The agreement was the wage for the full day. Those not hired would stand dejected, slumping their shoulders until the next landowner would come along. Maybe then they would jostle for position and show off their muscles. Sometimes an unscrupulous farmer would bargain to have the work done at a lower rate – three-quarters of a day for half a day's pay. It is, after all, the market economy.

But this farmer returned after only three hours and offered to pay a fair wage. At noon he did the same and again at three in the afternoon after the heat of the day had passed. Then almost unbelievably he went back a last time with only one hour of daylight left. Was it because the harvest was rich and ready and had to be brought in at all costs? Or was it because he had compassion upon the unemployed? The deals were struck and at the end of the day they lined up.

The steward was told to make them line up in reverse – the last in, the first to receive the money. Done deliberately so that the first there could see what had happened. Highly provocative stuff. If I had been the landowner, I should have paid off the first lot first – and then the last ones in could have had a nice and secret surprise.

So the steward lined them up in reverse – the last in, the first to receive the money. And when the money was handed out, it was not for one hour's work but for a whole day. What went on in their minds? A mistake? Madness? Pay packets mixed up? Did they stand in disbelief or did they take the money and run? The next people in had the same generosity shown. Perhaps by now the folk who had been engaged at noon or at nine in the morning or at day break were beginning to think of bonuses. Surely that would make sense. In a measured way they all were given a day's pay – the last to be paid, those who had worked longest and hardest received what had been agreed in the contract.

Not surprisingly as they took their money they grumbled to the employer: 'These latecomers have only done an hour's work while we have sweated the whole day long in the blazing sun.' The owner turns and says, 'Friend, friend, I am not being unfair to you. You have the wage we agreed. Take your pay and go home. I can do what I like with my own money. I choose to be kind. Don't be jealous.'

What a hard story.

Let's think first of the fellows who were hired at the end of the day. Think of their despair at the thought of going home empty-handed. The reality would have been of mouths to feed and not enough money to pay for basic bread and essential food stuffs. What is it like to know that your children cry with hunger? Plenty in the world know what that is like. Some here may have known hardship in childhood. But most of us have plenty in the house. It may not be elaborate but it is there.

These men must have been overwhelmed, after their failure to secure a job, to be given a whole day's pay. What pride. What gratitude. Their expectation of grief, their sense of failure turned to joy. Think of them running home and bursting in with a full day's pay! Think of the delight of being able to fill stomachs with plain simple food and have oil in the lamp and hope and strength for the next day.

The story echoes the tale of the Hebrew people in the wilderness, gasping for bread, thinking longingly of Egypt, where they were not hungry, but they were slaves. How selective their memory was! They could not face the hardness of hunger – indeed I do not know who can. Then God meets their needs – without ration or reason. Bread rained on them from heaven. Quails fly in exhausted and drop at their feet. They have meat for the evening and bread for breakfast and all given to them from God's free love.

In the same way, the labourers were able to go home rejoicing and holding their heads high. This story reminds us yet again of the free glorious love of God. Here is not an angry God. Here is not a stern taskmaster. Here is a God whose judgement is love.

My friends, if you, grieving for what you are or what you have done, judge yourself harshly, STOP. Stop now. God does not judge you. No matter what you have done. No matter what mess you think you are in, God forgives you. No matter how you judge yourself, God's answer is to pour out love and grace and forgiveness and more love. God's love is unconditional.

But wait. The ones who worked through the heat of the day were angry. I should have felt the same. Either those others should get less, or we get bonuses. But to get the same is not fair. Oh what a shop-keeping attitude we have in the church and the world! Everything to be measured and rationed and quantified.

I shall never forget the time I was visiting someone who had been a good church worker all her life. She told me that this parable was wrong. That Jesus had got it wrong. Her words were, 'I have slaved for the church all my life' … and she enumerated all the work she had done … 'and I WILL HAVE MY REWARD!' I will have my reward! It was one of the saddest moments of my life as a minister. Sad because I understood where she was coming from. We all like to be recognized. We all like to hear a 'Well done!' from time to time. It was immeasurably sad, because she would not accept that God's nature is to shower us with grace. To rain down bread from heaven. To pour out forgiveness upon us.

This story is not about the shop-keeping morality we use in our every day life. This story is about the nature of God. This story is about the mystery of God's dealings with us. It is about what is called grace. It is about the love of God pouring out into our poor dry shrivelled lives. Pouring out so that we are loved and accepted and forgiven. It does not rely on us being good or coming to church or leading moral and upright lives. It comes from the heart of God to our deepest need. It comes from the heart of God to our deepest sinfulness. It comes from the heart of God and sets us free. God's unbounded generosity is for all of us.

All of us are given that waterfall of love, that avalanche of mercy and kindness and acceptance and forgiveness that we call grace. Abundant grace. There will be enough for the day. Enough strength, enough hope, enough courage, enough grace – for today. We cannot store grace in a cupboard as we store a pot of apple jelly or a packet of tea. For today there is enough. It does not mean that we will be magically free of trouble or sorrow or anxiety or suffering. But it does mean that for today, we shall have overflowing grace.

25th September: 18th after Trinity

LOVING EVEN WHEN YOU CAN'T AGREE

By the Revd Martin Camroux
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Philippians 2:1–13

Have you ever noticed that Christians don't always agree with each other? Possibly if you're been living

on another planet this fact may be new to you. But if you open the newspaper currently it's amazing how often the word Anglican is followed by words like crisis, split, controversy or heresy. It appears probable that the Anglican Communion is about to split apart. And it may well not be the only one. Over questions like the ordination of homosexuals or women, or the authority of Scripture, there are fundamental divisions between Christians.

There is nothing new in this. Our plethora of denominations is evidence of a whole series of historic disagreements as to the nature of the Christian faith. Is baptism for adult believers only or is it also for the children of believing parents? Or is it right to baptize any child you can get within six feet of with a hosepipe? For those in the Catholic tradition of Anglicanism episcopacy is a non-negotiable expression of the unity of the faith. By contrast Reformed theology does not believe it is necessary at all and cannot do so without believing its own church life to be deficient. Catholics mostly believe in the infallibility of the Pope and advocate the celibacy of the clergy – others of us would find the belief implausible and the practice unattractive.

This diversity of belief and practice goes back to the very beginning. The New Testament is evidence of the diversity and pluralism of the first churches. The great debate was about the inclusive nature of the Church. The first church was all-Jewish and kept the Jewish law. To some to change this would be to surrender the very essence of the faith – and would mean setting aside large parts of Scripture. But to Paul it was clear that God was doing a new thing – that in him all the boundaries we employ to define rank and privilege and keep other people in place, all the structures by which human societies define who is in and who is out, have been destroyed. We live in a kingdom in which people are dignified not by race, gender or wealth but by God's love as shown in Jesus Christ. The debate was fierce. Paul found himself opposed by Jesus' brother James and by Peter. A great council of the church was held to try and find a compromise. Disagreement and debate have been part of the Christian life from the beginning and always will be.

Firstly this is an inevitable consequence of the fact that none of us has more than a partial hold of the truth. We walk by faith not sight. As Paul says 'We know only in part'. Or as Harry Emerson Fosdick says, 'The great God is, our partial ideas of him are partly true'. In this situation no-one will ever have the whole truth and there will be always be a plurality of possible truths. A long time ago, in a time of bitter division, the chaplain of Oliver Cromwell's army wrote, 'Let us not assume any power of infallibility towards each other, for another's truth is as dark to me as mine is to him – until the Lord enlighten us both.'

Secondly debate and intellectual challenge is what keeps the faith alive. There was a time when everyone thought slavery was compatible with Christian faith. And then came a day when some Christians felt it was not. There was a time when almost all Christians felt women must be subordinate to men. And then came a day when other Christians said that if in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave or free, male or female, that means the equality of women. In any developing, growing faith there is always going to be controversy. Without it ideas never change or grow – you're simply stuck where you are. Controversy is the lifeblood of a living church.

But controversy is not always good. It can be destructive, contemptuous and sterile. It can break up churches and destroy relationships. Sometimes Christians become so arrogant that they deny the possibility of any kind of faith except their own and become like Martin Luther saying, 'He who does not believe my doctrine is sure to be damned'. We go in for exclusive Christianity, we are the only real Christians, and there is no Gospel but ours.

It seems that the Church in Phillippi was split into two factions each bickering with the other. Interestingly it seems the feuding factions were led by two women – clearly leadership in the Early Church was not the all-male preserve we sometimes imagine. Trying to restore harmony to a divided church Paul writes that the secret of unity is to share the mind of Christ. He writes 'Make my joy complete, be of the same mind, having the same love … In humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let the same mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus'.

They are to seek a common mind. They are to seek to discover together what is true. The challenge is never simply to maintain unity; it is how to hold together unity and truth. The Church is not intended to be some post-modernist heaven where we can each hold our own version of the truth, you in your small corner and I in mine. For Paul the inclusive nature of the Church is a vital principle. He is not going to give it up. He cares desperately that others

come to see it. Of course there are some religious questions so trivial that it hardly matters what anyone believes about them – but the great matters of the faith can never be like that. We are to seek a common mind.

But how do we carry on this search for truth? Says Paul 'having the same love, in humility regard others as better than yourselves'. At the very least this means we ought to recognize whenever we argue with other Christians there is always the possibility that we are the one who is wrong. Have you ever had the experience of getting deeply involved in an argument, and then when you get home you sit and think about it, you say to yourself 'actually I was wrong'? If you haven't perhaps you ought to have, because sometimes that must be the case.

In some of the debates now going on in the Church I think maybe some of us are in danger of losing sight of this insight. It does not mean we are to give assent to what we believe to be wrong – but if in the midst of arguing our case we put people down or dismiss their faith with derisory contempt, then we are do not share the mind of Christ.

There is a story about Oliver Cromwell and George Fox that is worth recording. On religious matters between the founder of the Friends and the great Puritan there was a deep division. But one day they met and talked about the great doctrines of the faith. As they were parting Fox says, 'He caught me by the arm, and with tears in his eyes, said "Come again to my house, for if thou and I were an hour of a day together we should be nearer to each other"', and he added 'That he wished him no more ill than he did to his own soul'.

Even when we can't agree it is still possible to love.

MODELS OF GOD

Robert Crawford, *Is God a Scientist?: a dialogue between science and religion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004. £45.00. pp. 179. ISBN 1–4039–1688–8).

This is a curious book. Its central thesis is that God can be thought of as a scientist. Just as we find it helpful to think of God as Father, Shepherd, King and so on so we can add 'Scientist' to that list. There is, of course, a big difference between using 'scientist' as an analogy and as a more or less literal description. The image of shepherd does not mean that God keeps sheep but that there is an analogy between the way God cares for his people and the way a shepherd looks after his sheep. In other words the notion of 'scientist' is intended to serve as a model, However, it seems to me, that the model fails by overlooking the fact that the central element of scientific activity is lacking when applied to God. Science is an approach to finding out about systems that someone else has created and the 'finding out' is characteristically done via experimentation. The essence of an experiment is that the outcome is unknown in advance – otherwise it would not be a genuine experiment. The idea of God approaching the world which he has made in order to discover how it works, or to test his ideas about it, hardly squares with the idea of an omnipotent and omniscient God. The author is aware, of course, that there will be objections to his thesis and he devotes a final chapter to them. However, the objections seem to me to be rather superficial and do not address the fundamental objection that God himself is supposed to be conducting the experiment and not some external scientist. These things apart, the book covers most of the territory of the current science /religion debate. One gets the sense of a lecturer speaking to students who share a common background of knowledge. By the end of the first chapter, one has ranged over much the history of the method of science with most of the great names appearing. This would be overwhelming for the beginner but part of the stock of knowledge of those who are better prepared.

The model of God the scientist may illuminate some dark corners of our current picture of God but, it lacks credibility as a new and original insight into His nature.

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