

THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

6 : THE CHURCH.

The third of the three talks on "Christianity in today's world" – all questions which have to be faced if you want to be a Christian today. (And there are many more)

And none is simple. EVIDENCE of God's activity today is equivocal – you can't rule it out, but it isn't conclusive. The traditional SOURCES aren't as clear as you might hope, either. And we'll see that the CHURCH has good and bad parts too.

Why are we talking about these not entirely favourable topics ? I think we have to be straightforward and honest about these facts. We can account for them, but if you're sceptical the explanations sound like fairly thin excuses (which doesn't prove they're wrong).

But that's why we have to talk about the church, because it's the most visible part of Christianity, and we are inevitably JUDGED by what it does.

(And we're judged on the performance of the WHOLE church – perhaps the only real manifestation of Christian unity !)

WHAT IS THE CHURCH ?

The answer you get depends on who you ask.

TRADITIONALLY – the collection of followers of Jesus, beginning with the first apostles and linked to them by apostolic succession (the "laying on of hands").

Spoken of as the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ : the meaning comes from certain scriptural passages, but the implication of INTIMATE RELATION with Jesus is clear.

Theologically (I think), there are two parts to the church : the CHURCH MILITANT, which is the earthly bit that we see around us, and the CHURCH TRIUMPHANT in heaven. I've seen the names associated, sometimes by people who should know better, with militarism and with assumptions of complacency and superiority; so far as I know, that's nonsense, and the adjectives are about the relationship of the church with evil, not with people – militant against evil on earth, triumphant over evil in heaven.

I'm going to discuss only the church militant on earth. It is the body which carries on the work and witness of Jesus in the world now.

Does that help ? – probably not a lot.

PRACTICALLY – an extensive collection of more or less mutually antagonistic groups, united only in firmly believing that there should be only one group, to wit, theirs.

"Mainstream" churches today are lukewarm in their antagonism, and are ready to mix together quite extensively. But for the stalwart actions of their clergy in maintaining the tiny philosophical distinctions, they might have come together years ago – the laity, by and large, don't know what the fuss is about. (That's an oversimplification, but there's a truth in it.)

(The willingness to come together is fairly recent. My grandma was a staunch Methodist, and regarded Anglicans as very questionable people who did sinful things like dancing. I don't know whether there was much more to it than that.)

For what it's worth, I've been an active and thoughtful Christian for over twenty years now, and I *still* don't know what the differences are. There has always been something better to do than waste time finding out – and the only bit that's affected me has been that I'm not welcome to take communion in a Roman Catholic church, which is sad.

ONE MIGHT SUGGEST THAT the church as a whole is the collection of followers of Jesus, all of whom know :

- The Christianity of Jesus : love God, love your neighbour;
- Some other stuff, including a set of rules and regulations which characterise their denomination.

(Compare the Jews of Jesus's time; they knew about God, but were smothered in rules and regulations worked out by their scholars.)

SO THE CHURCH IS a bit of a mess.

But there are REASONS for that. Indeed, you can argue that it's inevitable.

You can clear up the mess to a significant extent if you insist on UNIFORMITY. You can do that by imposing a set of DOCTRINES, and punishing people who don't assent to them. That's been tried – excommunication, etc. Then all your members

EITHER put up with what they're offered and don't care enough about the doctrines to worry about them (the majority – but what's the point of having doctrines if no one notices ?)

OR think about the doctrines, and quite possibly (see last week) disagree and leave – with the energetic ones starting up rival churches, which is the way back to the mess.

Either way, you have to be VERY SURE THAT YOU'RE RIGHT with your choice of doctrines, and every choice is another topic to fight about and another chance of schism. The FLAW is that very few, if any, doctrines can be asserted with sufficient confidence to do that. (We'll look at the question of doctrine later.)

And if you *don't* insist on uniformity, then the mess is built-in.

SO you can have

EITHER a *monolithic* church with a clear philosophy and doctrine which persecutes anyone who doesn't toe the party line

OR a *fragmented* church in which most people could fit somewhere if they could stomach the continual skirmishing between the different groups.

NEITHER OF THESE LOOKS GOOD.

In fact, NEITHER OF THESE LOOKS CHRISTIAN, which is far more serious. Both give the impression that if you love God then you won't love your neighbour, which is certainly not what Jesus had in mind.

In practice, those are extremes. They're real; the descriptions fit, to some degree, the sort of thing that happens in churches which come on strong in pushing their doctrine. You can avoid the extremes by not asking the awkward questions. Unfortunately, this seems all too often to lead to

a *complacent* church, where nice people go to meet nice people and do nice things together, but without necessarily bothering too much about God. (That's what the minister is for.)

Well, those are CARICATURES, but they're real ones. The organisations are redeemed by the people, who (it seems to me) are much the same in all parts of the church :

Most Christians want to love God, and one another, and their neighbours, and (surprisingly often) their enemies. (They don't necessarily identify their enemies too well.) But most Christians are also human, and when they find that some parts of the job really aren't very nice they're not unhappy to find excuses to avoid them.

Those dirty, smelly, uncouth people over there aren't very nice, but of course we love them, and we'll pay someone else to look after them.

Those people over there with guns are our enemies, but of course we love them. But all our friends, and some of our ministers, seem to think it's all right if we get a lot of guns too.

Those people over there say they're Christians, and of course we love them, but they do say some very peculiar things, so we'd better not get too close in case it's infectious.

I'm human too, and I understand that all too well. I try not to do it, but it *is* tempting (particularly the first one – I don't do as badly on the others). I'm not conscious of a great deal of support from my church, which I think puts it in the complacent class. (That might be quite unfair, because there are certainly church agencies which do look after the dirty etc., but that doesn't help me a lot when one accosts me in the street.)

SUMMARY, OF A SORT.

The church could hardly be better set up to make some sort of a mess of it. I think :

The MAJORITY OF ITS MEMBERS are nice kind ordinary people, well intentioned, aware of the basics, wanting to be good, and believing what their "leaders" tell them.

The MAJORITY OF THE LEADERS are nice kind fairly ordinary people, well intentioned, aware of the basics, wanting to be good, but they've studied a bit of theology and their denomination's party line, and think it's important.

A MINORITY OF THE LEADERS are nice kind fairly ordinary people, well intentioned, aware of the basics, wanting to be good, but they've got some hobby horse which they're convinced is deeply Christian (creationism, ecology, law and order, pacifism), they're active, and they convince enough of the others to get it into the leaders' agenda.

A VERY FEW, AT ALL LEVELS, are in it for what they can get. It's easy; the rest are simple, trusting (loving one another), eager for guidance, and prey for any plausible rogue who sounds authoritative. When such a one gets into an influential position, there can be real abuses.

I pray that I am not one of either of the last two groups. I am not sure that you know it if you are.

COULD WE DO BETTER ?

There's another way. Recall my suggestion that the church might be seen as the collection of people who accept "the Christianity of Jesus : love God, love your neighbour" and also "some other stuff, including a set of rules and regulations which characterise their denomination". At least part of the mess comes from the order in which these are applied – all too often the other stuff comes first. Why can't we put THE CHRISTIANITY OF JESUS FIRST ? Could we build

a church which was first and foremost a *loving* church, with all its members insisting on loving one another, and not letting their differences of opinion affect that relationship ?

THAT MIGHT LOOK GOOD.

IT MIGHT EVEN LOOK CHRISTIAN.

But even that way there are problems. Does it mean that anyone can set up something called a Christian church with any doctrine whatever ? It's happening. I am fairly liberal in my opinions, but I don't know what to do when people who call themselves Christians don't believe in God.

CONCLUSION.

If my view is realistic, the church as we see it now is a crippled church. It is easy to pick holes. That's inevitable, because it was, and is, made of crippled people. (That's why we need the crutch.) It is highly unlikely that anything can be done about that. It will *always* be easy to pick holes.

So we put up with it, and do what we can accepting its limitations. It is redeemed by the presence within it, in all parts of which I've any experience, of people who, with all their imperfections, really are doing their best to follow Jesus's precepts.

CAN'T WE JUST IGNORE THE CHURCH ?

No, we can't. I used to think I could. I was wrong.

We need the church for :

support – help, friendship, companionship;
control – to check our own wild ideas;
variety – there are different views – narrow churches are perhaps not very healthy;
learning – to give stimuli for growth in daily and weekly meetings with other Christians;

and so on. THESE ARE IMPORTANT if we're going to keep alive.

And we need help to DO THE GOOD THINGS; many of them aren't things we can easily do alone, and just to know we have a couple of people who support what we do is a big help. (Even when we're sure we're doing what God wants !)

THEREFORE –

We have to accept it. Most people can find a part of the church where they can fit not too uncomfortably. (Comparatively active parts of the mainstream, largely complacent, churches are good places to look; they're all puzzled, and therefore tolerant of oddities.) If you love one another, you won't force your oddities on people who might be hurt by them – and you'll try to understand other people's oddities, of which there are many.

And YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO, OR BELIEVE, EVERYTHING. You can (for example) concentrate on Jesus's Christianity anywhere; much of the supposedly important doctrine doesn't seem to touch that at all, so you can ignore it. Defer the hard bits; experience suggests that some solve themselves, others turn out to be unimportant.