

## **Confronting Current Issues**

On the 2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Joseph and Mary, Son of God, I stood with my wife and children in a magnificent plaza outside St Peter's Church in the Vatican and gave thanks to God. To many people, the Vatican is one of the most sacred places in Christendom, a formidable collection of artistic and architectural masterpieces, of which the greatest is St Peter's Basilica, with its double colonnade and a circular piazza in front and bordered by palaces and gardens. Roman Catholics believe the church, one of the largest religious edifices in the world, is erected over the tomb of St Peter the Apostle.

### *Faith in action*

However, as studied the architecture I was not giving thanks for visible expressions of tradition. Nor for the history of institutional churches or the universal stretch of the world Christian movement. I was thinking about how the church had survived the onslaughts of Rome, Islam, godless capitalism, fascism and godless communism and had outgrown and outlasted them all; so much so that the largest congregation in the world today is the single greatest challenge to moribund state socialism in China. I reflected on the prostituting effects of the renaissance, relativism, higher criticism and secular humanism that sought, in their various ways, to extinguish faith and gave thanks that the message of salvation that Jesus brought to the world, the way he opened up for us to come back to God and life continues to touch the hearts and lives of millions.

In the heartland of the largest denomination of Christendom, as I met and talked to young people from around the world who had come to the Vatican to help Christians of all persuasions to celebrate the Year of Jubilee, I praised God for the transforming power of the message and electrifying power of the person of Jesus. No Muslim Imam, Hindu avatar, new age Master or guru had this influence. The church that Christ is building is bigger than any of us thinks or imagines. Bigger than our cathedrals, our para-church movements, our house churches, synods, conferences or church constitutions. Bigger than our parochialism and particularistic differences. HE is bigger than us all.

Having said that, I continue to be challenged by the need to drill down from the big picture to the needs and questions of individuals. The church is not an amorphous mass, but a combination of hundreds of millions of ordinary people, each of whom confronts needs, problems, challenges, issues and hard work in following the life and teachings on one life we believe is worth following and emulating because He was, and is, God. How do we make the big picture fit into the tiny canvass of the individual? If faith is to work, it must speak to peoples' circumstances, fears, doubts and life goals.

### *Salt and light*

A few years ago my wife and I hosted a group in our home involving friends interested in tackling some of the issues facing Christians in the modern era. We were concerned that the church's response tended either to overlook these issues or to have no answer simple enough for people to embrace. We believed that, if we are called by Jesus to be salt and light in our community (Matthew 5:13-14) we need to have reasoned and Biblical responses, unimpeachable in terms of truth but transparent to the average Christian believer and intellectually sound. What started out as a defined series of discussions centred on John Stott's popular book, "Issues Facing Christians Today" turned into a marathon session spanning several years. Each time we exhausted our list of topics we would identify new ones. We learned that there is no real issue confronting us today for which the Bible does not have clear answers. Unlike books such as the Koran, the Baghavat Gita or the Veda, the Bible demonstrates its relevance in terms of equipping the modern Christian with unambiguous information, guidance, precept and precedent to know how to live, even if some of the topics were not specifically addressed in the text, because the issues did not exist in Jesus' day.

If the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is to remain relevant it needs to have answers to modern questions. We cannot be self-indulgent and assume non-Christians are straining to ask questions for which we are suggesting answers, instead of the converse. If we do so, we run the risk of perpetuating the concept of narrow Christian sub-cultures, groups that exist of and for themselves, having a good time but ignorant of the fact that nobody else is really listening to what they have to say. If we are to be people of influence in places of influence we have to have clear answers to global warming, conservation, biodiversity, armed conflict, economic inequalities, debt, poverty, development, aid, human rights, human responsibility, work, unemployment, industrial relations, racial issues, AIDS, divorce, human fertilisation, gene technology, ethics, relativism, justice, capital punishment, equality, sexual issues, euthanasia, marriage and other forms of human relationship and so on. Christians who know what they are talking about in these areas need to speak to the issues as we confront them. The wisdom of God is able to give us sound guidance.

We need to be able to address challenges and changes in education, government, science, health and politics from a Biblical perspective and give an answer for "the hope that lies within us (1 Peter 3:13). If we cannot do so, we will be labelled obscurantists, troglodytes, irrelevant, out-of-date, out-of-touch and not worth listening to. Incidentally, that charge was never levelled at Jesus. People who met Jesus always listened to what he had to say. Whether they agreed or disagreed, they could not remain indifferent. We cannot afford to be isolationist and separated, catering only for those within our own ranks, fearful that if we put our heads above the trench we will be attacked and not have a suitable defence strategy. The Holy Spirit has come to help us develop effective and compelling responses to the non-Christian world.

*Responding to the questions people pose*

Reasonable people continue to ask the church why belief in God is rational and why He is real to us; why the church believes its message is inherently relevant today; what God can do for them; why, if God is powerful, evil exists in the world; whether God still performs miracles that science cannot explain; why Christians believe they have the monopoly on truth (even though Christians frequently believe different things); how we can be certain the Bible is true, accurate and reliable, why there are “so many hypocrites in the church”; where the world is heading; why we believe our God is the right one; why we believe at all (when so many people simply do not care); why we believe in the creation story in the face of questions about evolution; and why we are dogmatic when most people are ethically relative.. Some want to know why, if God is love, He would send men and women to Hell; why all roads do not necessarily lead to Heaven for good people; how they can have an assurance they are safe for eternity. Some are bound by stereotypes, assuming all the church is after is their money and not appreciating why Christians get involved in social movements and politics.

The responses we give to these questions are often subjective; God is real to us because of the nature of our life experiences, not because we have argued all of the propositions. Revelation is not always objective. For example, Muslim friends who became Christians because Jesus appeared to them in dreams and visions cannot quantify their experiences in terms others do not feel. However, if we rely too much on our subjective experiences we are no better equipped to answer the reasonable demands of non-Christians that we give an account for what we believe, and why.

We all face barriers in providing adequate responses. One example is how we use the Bible to explain what we believe. In today’s world, we are far removed from the original authors and readers of the Bible. We are removed linguistically – people in the Old Testament spoke Hebrew; some spoke Chaldean. New Testament Christians spoke Greek, Latin and (some of them) Aramaic. I have been in Aramaic-speaking villages in Syria, but I don’t know any Christians who do so. Few of us have the training to study the oldest surviving manuscripts and read the Scriptures in their original languages. We face geographical barriers; accounts mentioned throughout the Scriptures made sense to those familiar with rivers, mountains, towns and landmarks that are foreign to us. We are thousands of years removed from the events of the Bible, so our understanding of people and events recorded is simplistic.

Our societies, economies and political structures are different from those in the days of the Bible. Much is made, in the West, of our Judeo-Christian heritage, but that does not imply that our political or justice systems are quintessentially Biblical. Our systems do not provide ready insights into life and values in Biblical times. Our cultures have accreted to our Christian tradition events and values that have nothing whatsoever to do with original revelation. We are culturally removed; we live in a “post-modern” society, with Western values; customs and relationships in the Bible are often foreign to us. We are even different in religious terms. Our culture is generally not familiar with Jewish, Greek or Roman traditions, religious laws, feasts or types. Our appreciation of the simplest of Jesus’ parables is restricted by our lack of

understanding of the times in which he lived. Major tenets of some denominations and cults have been constructed on misunderstandings of verses in the Bible. We are all exposed to poor teaching, based on faulty exegesis (understanding the context in which the Bible was written; to whom it was written, when and why) – or no exegesis at all.

### *Truth remains*

God's truth never fails. The solution lies in defining what we believe and about revelation and truth, and why. Truth does not reside in our denominational structure. If it were, we would all run the risk of our faith eventually being absorbed in political cultures and accommodated to secularist viewpoints. Who we are and what we believe must ultimately be deeply informed by Christ and the transforming effect His word has in our lives.

Let me put it another way. At the height of the Cold War I encountered a group of Romanian and Bulgarian Christians at a meeting in Munich. When I relayed to them the extent to which Christians in the West prayed for them, that they would have the strength to maintain faith in the face of communist cadres and ideology, they countered by saying that Christians in Eastern Europe regularly interceded for believers in the West. They explained that those living under the shadow of the Iron Curtain knew what they believed and had counted the cost of following Christ. They were concerned believers in the West were in danger of being blinded by freedom and capitalism and becoming apathetic, indifferent and ineffectual in their testimonies, because they lacked definition and clarity about how they should live.

It is paramount that we have Biblical responses for an unbelieving world, but not lose sight of what it means to be Christians in the first place: Christocentric and faith-based in our life purpose, convinced in our hearts that we know whom we have believed and are fully persuaded that He is able to keep us (2 Timothy 1:12; Jude 24).