

# England a Christian Country?

Sermon on the fourth Sunday of Advent, 18 December 2011

University Church of St Mary, Oxford

JOHANNES ZACHHUBER

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Oxford made it into the national headlines this week when the PM spoke on the King James Bible in our Cathedral. While he said many uncontroversial things about the significance of the authorised version for the English language, for literature and in a way for our overall culture, the one line that caught the public's imagination was his claim that Britain still ought to be seen a Christian country.

Inevitably some were more sympathetic to this claim than others. And those who begged to differ with the PM's assessment were not all of one mind either. There were those who thought 'if only', and those who would respond, 'most fortunately not any longer'! Yet the interesting question, in my view, is what makes a country Christian and how, consequently, would we know whether a country such as the UK is Christian?

David Cameron made his case on the basis of the perseverance of social attitudes and moral principles that derive from Christianity in today's world. He referred to the indubitable origin of many elements of our political and legal system in Christian theology and also, not least due to the topic of his speech, to the abiding power exercised by the English Bible over the language we speak every day and its traces in many of the finest works of our literature.

Of those who disagreed with him, many pointed to a recent survey showing that the number of those who identify with the Christian and, indeed, with any faith in the UK is in rapid decline. More than 50% of those polled seemed to indicate that they would not consider themselves as adherents of any particular religion over against no more than a

quarter who identified as Christian. Among younger people, as one would expect, the results pointed even more strongly to the existence of a thoroughly secularised society where a mere minority is holding on to a religious faith.

There surely is some justification in looking at these realities. David Cameron is right, we live in a society that is still deeply permeated by ideas and symbols that continue to betray their Christian origin. And it is also true that an increasing number of people in our country do not see themselves as part of the Church any longer. Yet I wonder whether there is not something important both sides have missed out.

We heard in the gospel how Mary encountered the angel Gabriel who told her she would be, in a unique way, part of the history in which God himself becomes human. Does Mary believe in God? Does she consider herself a part of God's people and live according to the religious rules this entailed? The answer to both these questions must be yes, but this is not why she has become an exemplar for Christians over the centuries. This is not the reason why countless churches, this one included, have been named after and dedicated to her. What makes her remarkable is that, when it is announced to her that through her body God will come to the world, she is ready to accept him. 'Behold the handmaiden of the Lord', as the King James Bible beautifully puts it.

When we here, in a church like ours, and especially during the season of advent, consider the question of what makes anyone, an individual, a community or indeed a land, Christian, we should take this into account. Mary has faith in God, but this does not primarily mean that she thinks that such a being as God exists—though it must mean this at some level too—but that she says yes to him when he comes to interfere with her life and change it in the most dramatic way.

Given our inevitably romantic notions of Christmas, it is difficult for us to get a sense of what this acceptance meant in reality. It meant, according to Luke's narrative, giving birth in a strange place and under the least comfortable circumstances possible. It

meant having a son who for years lived the life of an outcast wandering from place to place without a home or family to sustain him until, finally, he was apprehended, tried and executed. Yet in and through all this, it also meant being close to the one person who more than anybody else permitted human beings to come into the presence of God.

How then can we have faith in this sense? How can we be willing and prepared to accept God when he comes to us? Most important, one might say, is to be willing to be surprised. He will encounter us where we may not expect him. The Bible is full of stories that show us how this happens. The priest who, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, rushes past the robbed man in the desert, surely expects to encounter God in the temple. He is not an areligious man, certainly not an atheist, but if we follow the story, he misses what may have been the one opportunity in his life properly to show his faith and his knowledge of God.

He is the opposite of Mary. She did not expect a visit from the angel, she had not, as far as we know, been meditating or spending her time reflecting about God's role in her life and she had most certainly not expected to become pregnant. Yet when it happened she recognised God's presence and accepted it.

The biblical stories indicate that God is found especially where people are in need. This is often understood as referring to poverty, illness or deprivation. There can, indeed, be no doubt that charitable work, which some of us do and many will support over the holidays, is an important way to give witness to the presence of God in our midst. Yet it would be facile to limit Christian recognition of God's coming to us to our willingness to engage with those who are in dire condition. Human need is all around us, and sometimes those who are highly praised for their commitment to the poor or the sick can be blind to it in the people nearest to them. What faith should give us is an ability to perceive God in those who happen to need us this moment, here and now.

How does faith give us this discernment? Here we can come back to David Cameron and his critics. The Prime Minister is right to remind us of the treasures the Christian tradition has bequeathed to our country. A Christian culture is not something anyone should despise. Not only because of all the beauty that is in religiously inspired literature, music or architecture, but because, if appropriated rightly, it can teach our eyes and hearts to become aware of God's traces in the world around us. This is no small thing.

His critics, however, are right too if, whatever their intention, they point out that the mere presence of this culture does not signify Christian faith without some willingness to use it as a guide to God's presence in our world. It therefore matters if an increasing number of people in this country have no use any longer for a word such as God or for the traditions of Christian belief and worship. Not because this would make it impossible for God to make himself known to them—for God, as today's gospel told us, nothing is impossible—but because it indicates a failure on the side of those who stand up for, and represent Christianity, to pass on those traditions as a way to God and to a fulfilled life, not as barriers that stand in its way.

Both, our inherited Christian culture and the community and the teachings of the Church then are important guides to our perception of God's coming into this world and the willingness to accept him into our lives. Yet neither offers a guarantee. The beauty of Christian art can open our eyes, but it can also absorb our attention and turn us away from the needs of our neighbour. Religious teachings and religious devotion likewise can do both: open us to the coming of God or harden our hearts to the true signs of his arrival in our own time.

What matters therefore is that we are willing to be open, to wait and be ready. We can then hope and indeed expect that God will come to us as he has come to those of whom the biblical stories speak. There is no guarantee, but we have his promise. It is this

willingness to trust and hope with open eyes that ultimately makes a Christian, and this is as easy and as difficult today as it has ever been.

Is England then, today, a Christian country? I do not know, but I believe that it can be one in 2011 as much as it could ever have been one throughout its long history.

Amen.