



Allocutio



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Allocutio: Religion

I have heard a fair degree of criticism about religion in the last few years. It tends to come from secularists who argue like this: religion is the cause of many troubles in the world. Like in the Middle-east and Northern Ireland! And they argue too that religion is against human advancement and has always objected when genuine people were trying to advance science and medicine. So let's get rid of it!

But I come to another problem which in this year in honour of St. Paul is worth keeping before us. And that is that a sincere person can have his or her ideas of God and of God's will seriously out of harmony with the truth. And that is a reality which can also get religion a bad name. History is dotted with people whose ideas of God only caused difficulty and even death and war.

St. Paul tells us he was the most devout and zealous of the Pharisee party who persecuted the Church. Did he have a real faith and did he have some love for God or was he someone following traditional ways without any deeper thought? And that leads us to a disturbing and humbling thought. Could it be that my idea of God and his will is off centre? The simple answer is: yes! And that is because God is a mystery, as is his will. The truth is you can never sit still when it comes to God, you can never say, "I have God now corked in a bottle." The words of the prophet Baruch still hold true: "Search for the Lord ten times as hard."

St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus helped him get an improved knowledge of God. God revealed himself to him as a real person he was hurting, not as a set of laws. Paul tells us that he had to go off for three years after this event as he tried to get his head around what happened and indeed we find him in several of his letters trying to make sense of God's dispositions. And while some question the authorship of several letters attributed to St. Paul, I just wonder if as life went on he simply developed new insights?

Let me turn to Our Lady who also went through a journey. Like Paul we can see Our Lady being forced by circumstances to ponder more deeply the mystery of God as it unfolded itself in her life. The Gospel of Luke emphasises her pondering. She wonders about the circumstances of the birth of her son. The angel has said he will be great but why such a humble and almost abandoned birth? And what does it mean that the poorest come to see this child? I wonder what hit her after Simeon said, "A sword will pierce your own heart too." And then she lost him physically for three days when he was twelve. But in what way did she lose him when he responded to her rebuke by saying, "Must I not be about my father's business?" Or when he seemed to rebuke her in Cana by his words, "Woman, my hour has not yet come!" We are told she was beside herself during his ministry. But what did it all compare with what she suffered beneath the Cross? She was a Jew whose idea of God was formed by her tradition. She was the girl whom the angel visited and said that her Son would have the throne of his father David. How reconcile all these realities? She pondered, struggled with the mystery and stayed with the pain of the mystery.

You will know the person of true religion by the way they are willing to be drawn into the mystery and live the mystery in faith although being drowned, as it were, in the mystery. The wolf in sheep's clothing may use the dogmas and the slogan's of religion and conform in some ways with what you are supposed to do but he or she will avoid the mystery of God and run from the pain of the mystery. Others of weak faith want certainty and clarity and would avoid the cloud of unknowing. That is why the weak disciples were not at the foot of the Cross with Mary and John.



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But you may say, “Father we still can ask the Way and we do need some clear lights.” Yes, we do. Just as the hill walker or mountaineer should have a map and compass in case the mist comes in. And so, following on from that image, we must hear deep in us the voice of the Father about Jesus when he spoke from the cloud, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!” He is the only Way. First and foremost Jesus is our light and we must be devoted to him and engage with all he said and did. And listening to him in his whole being we hear that we must trust in God and leave things in his hands. One of the sins of religions has been to try to control and use pressures to win or keep adherents. It is not just Moslems but Christians too who have used force and violence against others in matters of religious persuasion. It may appear to win but later it can be thrown back at them and becomes an obstacle. Or I think of those cults who try to hold adherents by mind control while the main object is to keep their funds. It is worth remembering the number of times in her life that Mary must have felt a loss of control over Jesus and the events around his life. But she carried on in faith and must have said time and time again, “I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to his will!” At the heart of true religion is a personal encounter with God, not rules, not dogmatic slogans even if they have a place.

Jesus so often asked us to become like little children. Why? Little children are open to the whole world of possibilities and have not been routed into certain grooves or ruts. That is how they are open to the touch of God. God wants us not to be rigid before his touch but to be like putty. So much of Jesus mission was to try and get people to let go an impoverished notion of God and to open themselves to something deeper. He wanted us to be like children who trust, not like a parent who controls. To become like little children is to become a clean slate before God and allow him to write the mystery in your heart, the awesome mystery of God’s love. But as he said today in the gospel: those who have eyes and ears but have them closed.

Being closed and rigid also leads to religion getting a bad name. Like people who use slogans as slogans and do not really try to understand the deeper meaning of the doctrine and its implications. Or those whose hearts have not really been touched and whose behaviour towards others in the name of religion reflects things like greed or insecurity or their lust for power! But wherever we have learnt to love others with no strings attached and as a result people experience real love, because we trust God’s love, that makes a huge difference.

We in the Legion of Mary follow the way and example of the holiest adherent to the road of religious faith. She immersed herself in a mystery and let God be in charge. And she trusted even if she did not understand and even when events overwhelmed her. Many people find that religion hard. But it is the authentic one.

Amen.

Fr Paul Churchill