**Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth. Pembroke 29 October**

To be honest, when I looked at the readings for this service I couldn’t see where to start. So, I’ve latched onto just one memorable sentence: ‘Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth.’

According to recent research 53% of the population of the UK say they have no religion at all, and in the 18-24 year-old demographic that increases to 71% not interested in religion. Why would that be? My view has been that it’s intellectual: that the metaphysical claims of Christian belief and doctrine are seen as being at odds with science and philosophy as now generally understood, with clergy clinging to pre-modern language about divine providence. One of my colleagues at St Hilda’s, who teaches seventeenth century English, disagrees and says it’s political disenchantment. What has put young people off religion, she says, is they see it as politically reactionary – e.g. reluctance to allow women bishops, being so disingenuous about gay rights, being confused by a colonial past, compromising with African sexual ethics while not giving leadership to people of African ethnicity, being the established church and having an unduly privileged position in the House of Lords and therefore the government of our country. Or, it might simply be, in a consumerist, instant communication society, there are too many competing, pleasurable and attractive alternatives.

But I shouldn’t be telling you, you should be telling me.

So what sense can be made of Solomon’s cry, ‘Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth.’ When I was at school, one year this passage was set to be spoken in the verse speaking competition. And it *is* poetry. Listen to this again: ‘before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.’

We need to remember that a great deal of religious and theological language is metaphorical, analogous, figurative, poetic. For example, it’s impossible to speak of God without using analogy because God is unknowable. (‘Immortal, invisible God only wise’). So, people have said God is like a father, a monarch, a shepherd, a mountain, love, or goodness, or justice, or the creative force of nature.

When I bang the pulpit and say remember now thy creator in the days thy youth, the word *creator* can stand for a rich variety of things, it seems to me: an intuitive sense of the divine, or value, or what ultimately matters. And if we think that love is there somewhere in the equation, then we might think of the great creativity that love implies. And we might also think of Plato’s idea of the sovereignty of good: that goodness has an eternal reality beyond our experience of it, an external, objective reality. These are instinctive religious responses, often made in reaction to the exasperated cry, ‘surely there must be more to life than this.’

I’ve just written a small book about suffering and redemption which examines a number of poems, both religious and secular, to tease out various theological questions. One is Larkin’s ‘Ambulances’ – you probably know it; it picks up the theme of death, and the meaning of life, in a cleverly extended image of an ambulance rushing through the city streets, interrupting ordinary people’s lunchbreak and midday shopping, to attend a seriously ill patient. The sight of the patient’s ‘wild white face’ above the red blankets on the stretcher sends a momentary shock of mortality through those who see it. Children and women coming from the shops

…see

A wild white face that overtops

Red stretcher-blankets momently

As it is carried in and stowed,

And sense the solving emptiness

That lies just under all we do…

For borne away in deadened air

May go the sudden shut of loss

Round something nearly at an end,

And what cohered in it across

The years, the unique random blend

Of families and fashions, there

At last begin to loosen. Far

From the exchange of love to lie

Unreachable inside a room

The traffic parts to let go by

Brings closer what is left to come,

And dulls to distance all we are.

For a second they ‘sense the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do’. They see themselves in the victim’s plight and wonder what it all – ‘families and fashions’ – adds up to. Everything, from conception, ‘the exchange of love’, to being confined in the back of this grey 1961 ambulance is suddenly pulled into focus in such a way as questions ‘all we are’.

To me it’s not clear whether this is a totally pessimistic view, suggesting life is devoid of meaning and purpose or whether, in a colourful way, it makes Socrates’ claim that an unexamined life is not worth living. The images of ‘children strewn on steps’, shops, ‘smells of different dinners’, and ‘families and fashions’ imply an ordinary shallow, trivialised existence that begs the question: isn’t there more to life than this? And so I take it as an appeal to seriousness – the same seriousness that Larkin talks about in another poem, ‘Church Going’, where a cynical visitor to a run-down church is surprised by ‘A hunger in himself to be more serious’.

(Frank Skinner - ‘In twenty-first century Britain, where, according to the papers, everybody’s drunk, illiterate and carrying a knife, people still queue up to see beautiful things.’)

If most 18-24 year-olds don’t believe in Christianity, what do they believe in? Their lives are not all about celebrity and consumerism, snapchat and instant gratification; they’re more serious than that; for example, committed to the environment and gender and racial justice. At St Hilda’s I can’t get people to come to our charmless and utilitarian chapel, but I can get 25 people to come to a discussion about God and the meaning of life. Because, basically, whoever we are, it’s hard to avoid those big questions: who am I? Why am I here? What is my destiny? What is the ultimate significance of this extraordinary outburst of intelligent, self-reflective life on a small planet orbiting a minor star in an expanding universe billions of light years across? Assuming the word ‘across’ has any useful meaning in that context. So ‘creator’ in my text can stand for this seriousness too. Don’t neglect being serious in the days of thy youth because it will add immense meaning to your life.

Christianity is pretty useful in speaking to these questions: in talking of going the extra mile, turning the other cheek, of the last being first and the first last, or to put it another way, self-giving love. Adding ‘self-giving’ to love is part of its genius, and caring for the despised and the outcast another. Or Christianity’s emphasis on humility: recognising, through the experience of awe and wonder that there is much that is greater than you. Also the teaching that, despite the apparent collapse and relativism of moral standards in the contemporary world there is an objective moral reality called God.

John Cottingham: ‘For the God who is the object of worship in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions is conceived of as the objective, independent reality who is the sole fountainhead of truth, beauty and goodness—the giver (as the Epistle of James puts it) of “every good and every perfect gift”.

Cottingham mentions beauty and increasingly I see music, drama, poetry and painting satisfying the hunger for seriousness in our society. And it’s no accident, therefore, that Choral Evensong is growing in popularity in cathedrals and churches. Despite the fact that there’s a creed in the middle of it, people who struggle with what they see as the Church’s pre-modern language can find a transcendent experience though the music and the ambience, and what I mean by transcendent in that context is a sense of being taken out of themselves. An important way of suppressing the ego in order to see the good.

Are churches obscuring the light of Christian teaching by refusing to take seriously the questions people both outside and inside the Church are asking.

Churches need to use a vocabulary more sympathetic to our times. Back in 1948 a German theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, put forward a theory of kerygma and myth. His idea was that while the New Testament’s religious proclamation (kerygma) rings true today, it is unreasonable to expect modern people to accept the mythical world picture in which it is embedded (myth). Put crudely, the kerygma is the moral and transcendent seriousness I’ve just tried to describe, and the myth is the premodern assumptions about cosmology, the human body, the fear of demons, the role of women, and the smallness of creation etc etc in which that good news is set. It’s extraordinary, to me at least, to think that seventy years later the Church still hasn’t accepted this brilliant and obvious insight. And that it seems frightened to release its message from that mythological framework lest the whole pack of cards falls down. But the statistics I quoted at the beginning show that it *has* fallen down. We are almost exactly 500 years from the day when Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. The next reformation has to be an opening of the doors to listen to the objections and ideas of the 53% and the 71% and to engage with them.