

True spirituality

'I am not religious – but I am spiritual.' That is a phrase that you may hear in any discussion of faith, and it's one that neatly expresses an attitude of many people here in what we like to call our enlightened, secular west. So, 'I am not religious...': those words carry a whole freight-load of antagonism towards religion. For a thousand perfectly understandable reasons many people today are profoundly suspicious of religion, especially anything to do with organised religion and church. But then: '...but I'm spiritual' and those words indicate something significant. They suggest that while folk have had enough of religion they are wary of throwing the baby out with the bath water and getting rid of too much. For many the vision of a completely secular, materialistic society is not an attractive one. Many people feel a need for what is sometimes called 'transcendence' – the beyond, the eternal, something over and above the mundane, though they are reluctant to try to define it or to pin it down. And 'spiritual' is the word used. Hence, 'I'm not religious – but I'm spiritual.'

Well, our reading this morning from the Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth provides us with a good opportunity to consider spirituality and what it means to be spiritual. Those of you who have been following our studies in the past weeks of this letter will recall that Paul had founded this church in Corinth about five years earlier and had established there a remarkable social experiment. In a typical city of the day, divided along lines of wealth and privilege and status, the church in Corinth modelled something different: a community where rich and poor, slave owner and slave sat down together at table in a spirit of deep fellowship - what Paul calls in Greek *koinonia*. Here, in *koinonia*, all the worldly dynamics of power and prestige were reconfigured as the sovereign rule of the crucified Lord Jesus Christ bound people together.

Now, however, things were going astray and divisions were opening up once again, fracturing *koinonia*. And one source of division concerned spirituality. Apparently the church was splintering into different factions allied to different leaders – Paul himself or someone called Apollos – with some considered more 'spiritual' than others, and so there was quarrelling and jealousy. And then later in the letter we find that some in the church were manifesting rather strange phenomena: they were speaking in tongues - outbursts of what were claimed to be ecstatic, heavenly languages. And of course if you spoke in tongues then you were a spiritual cut above everyone else.

Well, Paul is pretty brutal. In effect he says you don't know what spirituality means. I can't even address you as spiritual people. I can't address you as mature in the faith for you are just infants, not yet ready for spiritual meat, fit only for spiritual breast milk. You are not of the spirit but of the flesh, writes Paul – and by 'the flesh' he does not mean that the Corinthians were especially prone to bodily sins: sins of lust and greed. The contrast is between being spiritual, which simply means to have your whole life open to the Holy Spirit of God: mind, body, emotions - and being of the flesh, being resistant to the Spirit.

So this morning let's think about spirituality – what it means to be a spiritual person, open and shaped by God's Spirit. And to do that I want to have a conversation between Corinth and Amsterdam, between what Paul would have recognised as spirituality in his day and how it might be construed today among those who consider themselves spiritual – but definitely not religious.

The first observation that I would make is that unlike in Paul's time, spirituality today is understood in very individualistic terms, and many of what are regarded today as spiritual practices are things that we do on our own. A former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once famously defined religion as what we do with our solitude. And unfortunately that description is reflected in approaches to spirituality today. So, for example, people who practice yoga might join with other people in a yoga group, for company, but essentially it is a solo activity. Or some of you may be aware of the current popularity of what is called 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness involves practices which draw on Buddhist roots and which encourage people to slow, down, to centre themselves, to calm the mind from flitting from past to future and to indwell the moment. And

mindfulness is popular among high achievers who lead busy lives with crammed ‘agendas’ and who need to slow down, to stop doing and to just be. And doubtless for such people this can be very helpful, though I can’t help but wonder if mindfulness and similar practices have more to do with therapy than spirituality: nothing wrong with that – in today’s crazy world we might need a bit of therapy, but don’t confuse the therapeutic with the spiritual. Either way, however, modern life is highly individualised and atomised and the nature of community has changed enormously with the growth of social media, and practices like mindfulness and yoga are very much at home in this social climate - but they know nothing of that quality of the church at Corinth, *koinonia*: deep-rooted fellowship, face-to-face community, the solidarity which is the setting for the spiritual life.

You see, true religion is not what we do with our solitude – it is what we do together, in community, in *koinonia*, and Paul refers to us here not individualistically but together, as God’s field, God’s building. And *koinonia* is different from friendship because we choose our friends and usually they are people like us. But *koinonia* throws us into a mix of people who share faith in Christ, but who may be very unlike us, and may understand their faith differently and practice their faith differently and with whom we may find ourselves disagreeing and arguing. Well, welcome to true spirituality because it is in that cut and thrust of *koinonia* and not in splendid isolation that true spirituality is formed. And actually it was no bad thing in itself that some in the church in Corinth preferred Apollos and some preferred Paul because we all find some teachers and some leaders more helpful than others. The problem arose when this became a cause for conflict and division rather than a recognition of variety and diversity and something formative and enriching. True spirituality, then is corporate. And yes, of course we all have our own personal, individual relationship with God and our times of solitude with God, but that is always set in a community context.

Secondly, however, I would suggest that spirituality today is often construed as rather other-worldly, as involving withdrawal and escape from the world. So we take time out for our spiritual practices and in our detachment we are calmed and centred and focused. True spirituality however, I would insist, is deeply practical, and yes it may involve withdrawal and time out from all the craziness but true spirituality is formed when we re-engage with the world, when the rubber hits the road and where we live out our vocation as disciples of Christ and practice our faith.

Let me tell you about a 16th century French monk who wrote a spiritual classic entitled *The Practice of the Presence of God*. At an early age William Herman had a vision that set him on a spiritual path: in the dead of winter he saw a lifeless tree that seemed to him to be just waiting for new life, for the new surge and energy of spring. And he saw himself in that tree, wintry and dead, but he realised that the life of God, the Spirit of God, was waiting to possess him and to renew him. Well, William became a soldier, but he was something of a failure, and eventually he entered a monastery in Paris, where he became Brother Lawrence. There he was assigned to the kitchen, despite the fact that he was clumsy and awkward – but it was in that kitchen that he learnt how to combine prayer with the most menial tasks of preparing food, cooking, washing up. It was there in the dynamic between being on his knees in prayer and on his knees scrubbing the floor, in the mix of praise and prayer and pots and pans that Brother Lawrence practiced the presence of God and discovered true spirituality.

So returning to Corinth, people there identified spirituality with heavenly phenomena, speaking in tongues, strange other-worldly languages. But later in his letter Paul pens his great chapter on love, chapter 13th, the most famous chapter on love ever written. And the love described there translates a Greek word, *agape*, and *agape* is practical and down to earth. It’s not primarily about feeling but doing. *Agape* describes God’s love that reaches down to earth, that gets its hands dirty, that eats with sinners and heals the sick and that washed the filthy feet of faithless disciples. It was in that practical love that Brother Lawrence practiced the presence of God, and as he wrote: ‘We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.’ That is where true spirituality is formed – in the interface between heaven and earth, in the dynamic between prayer and practice, in the actions and practices of love.

Continuing, though, and lastly, with that image of the tree in Brother Lawrence's life, a tree waiting for life, we are reminded of Paul's words in our reading: 'I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.' And here we are reminded that spirituality is something we grow into, it's a process, it's a journey. And I say this because sometimes when people speak of spirituality they do so as if it is something that you either have or don't have, a quality that you may or may not have. I'm spiritual: people say that sometimes the way they say, 'I'm superstitious' – some people are and some people aren't. Well, spirituality is not like that. It's about growth, like the tree. It's about walking with Jesus, learning to live Jesus' way, opening our lives to the Holy Spirit and allowing God to grow in us. I love the American writer Maya Angelou's comment: 'I'm always amazed when people say, 'I'm a Christian.' I think, 'Already?' Yes, that's the goal but there is a lot of God given growth before we reach it.

Such growth will involve prayer and worship. And it will involve community, *koinonia*, the sometimes turbulent but wonderfully rich life of difference in the church. And it will emerge out of the daily, practical tasks of *agape*, the incarnational love of God. Here is the true spirituality which could restore what had been lost in the church in Corinth, and which might just restore the church in our own day too. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
 we gather here this morning
 grateful for the blessings of a new day,
 thankful for life and health and strength
 and all that enriches our days here on earth.
 We come to praise you, the source, the giver,
 the one from whose open hand all good things come.
 But we come this morning also
 because we are hungry and we are thirsty:
 hungry for more than is all too often on offer in this world,
 thirsty for the refreshment of our souls,
 longing for the bread of life and for the Holy Spirit -
 yearning for you.
 O God forgive us that we so often seek life in the wrong places:
 forgive us that we quench and resist the Holy Spirit,
 that our horizons are narrowed and that we chase shadows
 when you are calling us into the light.
 O Lord, have mercy upon us and forgive us.
 Send your Holy Spirit upon us afresh:
 break open our lives to you and fill them,
 and redirect them to follow Jesus,
 walking with him on the road of discipleship.
 We pray these things in his name and we join
 in the words he taught us, saying together...