

Being a bigot ?

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God our redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:
grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge.

Today's text is from the Luke's gospel chapter 1 and verse 34, '**How can this be ?**'

On Radio 4 a couple of weeks ago, I clearly heard that we were being called bigots. And who was calling us bigots ? - The National Secular Society. Enough said ! But the word caught my attention. Am I a bigot ? Are you a bigot ? Are we all bigots ? Although there the word was specifically being aimed at the Church of England, I guess it might be equally critical of all Christians everywhere.

So what do you think the word means ? I wasn't quite sure though I knew it was not a nice word to use of someone. Actually, it is not a word I personally use; bigot is not a word in my active vocabulary though I know it is a term of abuse, a pejorative word often used during the Troubles in Northern Ireland by Protestants of Catholics and by Catholics of Protestants. But what does the word mean?

I took both my Collins and my Oxford English Dictionary off the shelf. The Collins' definition made me smile: 'a person who is intolerant of any ideas other than his or her own especially on religion, politics, or race [from the Old French: a name applied contemptuously to the Normans by the French, of obscure origin] Don't you love it ! To be a bigot is just what the French used to think of the Normans ! But you can see the shape of the criticism: intolerance expressed in religion, race or politics. The definition in the OED is more detailed: first it indicates that a bigot is 'a hypocrite' or 'a superstitious person' then from 1661 the clincher: a bigot is 'a person obstinately or unreasonably wedded to a creed, opinion or ritual'.

Harsh – but is it true? I think not.

Firstly, hypocrites? Well, it is possible. We do have standards and we have no less an example of Jesus and his mother, Mary, to emulate. And because it is hard, if not impossible, to be perfect, then we sometimes inevitably do and must fail, falling short of the people God means us to be. But Christianity is realistic about the human condition and it is our attempt to live a Christian life that is important. So no, we are not hypocrites in that we sincerely want to do good even though we may often fail. A true hypocrite doesn't give a toss – all he's interested in is seeming to be good while enjoying being bad. A hypocrite majors on appearance not reality. For us as Christians our faith is real, however imperfect. So are we hypocrites ? I think not.

Then, are we superstitious ? Possibly . . . in that it is easy to mistake the symbols of our faith for what they really stand for: wearing a cross as a fashion accessory instead of a statement of faith; lighting a candle because it is pretty rather than that its light reflects the prayer we've just prayed; crossing ourselves to ward off evil rather than as a sign of blessing by our identification with Christ's passion. Yes, it's possible we're superstitious but religion is so much more than superstition: superstition is the uncritical behaviour of the uniformed; religion is an attempt to respond to the revelation of a living, loving God. So are we at heart superstitious ? I think not.

Finally are we obstinately and unreasonably wedded to our faith ? Obstinate might be just the word an enemy might use to describe something a friend would think of as well-founded, secure, firm. I'd like to think my faith is well-grounded but you know and I know that for the faithful, doubt is something from time to time we all can and do experience. If no less a Christian than Mother Theresa of Calcutta can experience doubt and if the dark night of the soul is something a spiritual people like St John of the Cross can experience, then we all can be open to uncertainty. As for our beliefs being unreasonable what nonsense. The Early Church Fathers, the Doctors of the Church, some of the finest minds of each generation, all have demonstrated that our faith is reasonable, based in rational thought and clear, logical thinking. Okay rational argument rarely persuades anyone to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour but we don't leave our brain at the door when we come into church - far from it, I want you think for yourselves !

And the thought I want to leave with you today on this the fourth Sunday of Advent is the virginity of Blessed Virgin Mary. She knew she was a virgin. She knew she had never known a man in the carnal sense of knowing. She knew as well as anyone of us knows where babies come from. So like anyone C21 boy or girl in the street, she knew what was what. So she could ask the Angel Gabriel the question which is my text today: **How can that be ?** Great question but fact is, experiencing the truth and the presence of an angel in her room in Nazareth, the young girl, Mary, responded with true humility to the will of God and in her own way said yes to God's plan for her.

But let me leave you with the question which proves that we can't possibly be bigots, **How can that be ?**

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Carol Service

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

18th December, 2011

H: Sermon 25: Bigot

