

The year I was born the more religious of our brethren across the Atlantic exploded in a fervent frenzy of faithful indignation. The Bible belt of the United States was engulfed. Fired with the peculiar zeal of the offended righteous the Southern States were smitten with a rash of censorship, harassment, death threats, iconoclasm and book burning. And why? Well not because someone having a prophetic vision of a child born that night in Leeds destined to provide the world with more than it could stomach of dodgy music, hack journalism and tedious sermons. Nothing so close to home. No, the furore over the pond was all down to an interview, published that year, in which John Lennon had declared that The Beatles were 'bigger' (whatever that means) 'than Jesus'.

Now you've probably guessed I'm not going to stand here and lecture you about not letting religious fervour get out of hand: I can't really see revival breaking out at X am in Beddington. Nor do I wish to rant about what a terrible, irreligious man Mr Lennon was. John Lennon was one of the most successful musicians of the twentieth century, and though he may have got it wrong about Jesus on this particular occasion, we can no more expect a musician to shed piercing light upon the mysteries of Christ's body on earth than we can the Archdeacon of Croydon to explain why, Kylie Mingoue repeatedly gets to number one in the charts and yet you will never, ever find anyone who will admit to owning one of her records, much less buying a copy. Maybe the Archdeacon does. You never know.

But back to The Beatles vs Jesus. In a very limited way, - number of hit singles or gold discs for example - The Beatles were 'bigger' than Jesus;. What Lennon had been trying to put across was that the kids in the 60s cared more about the Beatles than they did Jesus, which was undoubtedly true, and has become more true in every succeeding decade. Though the 'Beatles' part of the equation may have changed with the fashions of the time, that religion is losing out in the battle for young hearts is beyond dispute.

However, what I want to talk about today is the less well reported part of the infamous interview. After the 'bigger than Jesus' gaffe, Lennon continues, to say that:

*'Jesus was alright, but his disciples were thick and ordinary.'*

Certainly, his estimation of *Jesus* was monumentally short of the mark, but as far as the *disciples* were concerned, he was bang on. Not strong and stable.

Thick.

And ordinary.

Thank God for that.

Read the Gospels and the picture you will see of the disciples is that of apparently wilful ignorance. Attracted, despite themselves to Jesus, they seem to have precious little inkling, despite all the many great acts of power and incomparable words of wisdom, impressive healings, etc. etc. of what was actually going on. Let's take just one example of many: Having witnessed the feeding of the five thousand (five loaves and two fish- remember?), we find the disciples a couple of chapters later in Mark's Gospel in a similar situation. Presented this time with a hungry *four* thousand who forgot to bring their packed lunch and find themselves several hundred years away from the nearest Pret a Manger, the disciples proceed bumbling and stumbling around worrying about having no bread and prompting Jesus to sternly ask them:

*"Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?..."Do you not yet understand?"*

Erm. No. Thick and ordinary remember?

Some of this is, no doubt, partly the entirely understandable incomprehension in the face of the divine that affects us all, but partly it is, as Mark's none too flattering portrait suggests, even if we're going to be charitable about it; the truth is, the disciples were not really the brightest pennies in the bank. Jesus' disciples were generally humble folk- mostly fishermen- living in a time and a place where the idea of universal state education would have been incomprehensible. It's highly unlikely that any of 'the twelve' would even have been able to read, with the exception of Matthew who needed to know how to write nasty letters when tax returns were late. True, being illiterate does not make you an imbecile, but we

can confidently predict that the verdict of first century Palestine and almost definitely that of its intelligentsia would have been, "Disciples of Jesus? Thick."

And yet, these extraordinarily ordinary, illiterate, Judean oiks changed the world and we are still feeling the effects of that change today.

Jesus called them, and rejoiced in their lack of wisdom :

*"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth", Jesus says in the Gospel reading we have just heard "Because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;"*

Lest we think that this portrait of low-IQ Christians is something limited to Jesus and his immediate disciples, listen to what Saint Paul had to say to the next generation of the Church, in Corinth, about the limits of human wisdom and God's foolishness. In his first letter to the Corinthians he writes:

*"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards ... But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong"*

Corinth, around 50 AD: unremarkable, ordinary, everyday people creating something beyond their imaginings. It's not always easy to realise that this is where the true church is to be found. Take the way we think about the Saints for example. Let's stay with Saint Paul. I've said it often but it's worth repeating. We usually look at the incredible achievements of Paul- his tireless journeys, his endurance in the face of terrible sufferings, his endless round of preaching, exhorting, encouraging- and we see the father of the Gentile churches, a driven, obsessed man who could never forget that met his Saviour on the road to Damascus and cannot rest until he has completed the work God has given to him.

And yet what we know as Saint Paul in this portrait is only a cardboard cutout, a two dimensional view with no depth. For the depth of the Paul phenomenon is that the Saint is really hundreds of people- those who accompanied Paul on his journeys, who sailed his boats, who bought his tents, who welcomed him, who tried, got

it wrong and had to be corrected at Corinth, who followed in his wake and tended the shoots he had planted. All the people we never hear about, the ordinary, everyday, nameless people without whom Saint Paul would have just been an irritating pious Pharisee from a backwater of the Roman Empire.

God takes the very ordinary and transforms it beyond recognition. Remember, however, that, for all this transformation, what is truly remarkable is that what God transforms also remains ordinary. God is at work within us here, right now, transforming us, yet looking around, none of us are sporting a halo. When we get the faith, God does not remove and replace what is there with something different. It's not as if we are plucked up from our lowly estate and elevated to a higher level. Instead to the Christian eye, the whole world view that conceives of things arranged in levels simply dissolves: the Love that God effects transformation, not translation; His Kingdom changes everything, turns everything on its head, truly turns the world upside down. The risen, exalted Christ *is* the transformed Jesus who walked the soil of Galilee and still bears the wounds of his crucifixion.

Let's look at it another way. If Jesus had surrounded himself with the great and the good, the intelligent or the beautiful, could we conclude that God loves us unconditionally, as we are? No. We would conclude that he loved us because we were powerful or rich or attractive or influential or academically gifted or whatever we humans usually use to measure the value of our worth. And how wrong we would be. This is a mistake we often make in another form: assuming that because we are rich or successful or in great demand these are signs that God loves us. And of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Where His children are concerned there is no 'ordinary' or 'extraordinary' for God: in this respect Love is blind: the indiscriminate, undiscriminating, total besotted Love of God for humanity.

So thank God for the thick and the ordinary, and for mere infants: for on these foundations he has built that most extraordinary thing: his Church.

Fr Andrew Fenby 2017