

'The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel'. (2 Corinthians 4: 4)

A friend of mine is just over halfway through a 10-year project –
to build a working scale-model of Norwich station as it was in 1954.

It's an amazing enterprise, with dozens of tracks –
and hundreds of buildings and bridges and locomotives and wagons.

Whenever I go to see him – I express admiration for the enormity of the enterprise.

But I'm not in the *slightest bit* interested in it – and can't *begin* to imagine why he is.

There's nothing *wrong* with what he's doing, of course – and he's not hurting anyone.

But it's just plain weird – to spend so much time and money –
on doing it in the first place!

Or so it seems to me.

I obviously can't get inside his head – so don't know what's driving him.

Which means I haven't got a clue why he started it –
and can't imagine what makes him want to continue it –
day after day, after week, after month, after year.

And it's always like that.

We simply don't know (and can *never* know) –
what it's like – to be another person.

what it's like – to *see* things through *their* eyes.

what it's like – to *feel* things the way they do.

what it's like – to have *their particular history* –
with all its memories and joys and sadnesses.

And that's the case – *even with those we know really well.*

We only *ever* experience the world from inside our own head –
and with our own preoccupations and drives and passions.

Which is why it's often a complete mystery –
why others think and behave as they do.

St Paul had exactly this problem – as he made clear in that second reading.

He couldn't understand why most of the people he came across –

weren't down on their knees in gratitude –

at hearing the Good News he was trying to spread –

but simply ignored both him and it –

and got on with their lives.

Just as they do in our society today, in fact.

It's something many churchgoers cannot *begin* to comprehend, either.

How can it be –

that this religion, which is so important to them –

is about as important to other people –

as my friend's model of Norwich station is to me?

How can it be –

that others just look on with bemusement –

at the time we spend in and around churches –

completely unable to understand why we bother?

Why won't they take what we say – seriously?

Is the problem with them?

Or with us?

Is the problem to do with the message?

Or with the messengers?

Who are the odd ones out?

Them? Or us?

And how can we tell?

But because our faith is *so* important to us –
and because we know just what a difference it makes to people –
we're reluctant to leave it like that.

Which means – *we're reluctant to leave them alone.*

We want them to have some of the riches that we've got –
(as it would be greedy to keep them to ourselves)
and so enormous amounts of effort is spent trying – to 'get the message out'.

It's called Mission –
and we're all supposed to be at it – all the time.

But however well meant –
and however well-intentioned –
someone looking in from the outside –
might see it as arrogant or patronising (or both) –
in that it's all premised on the idea that we know better than they do –
and can say (with confidence) – what's good for them.

My friend has *never* tried to convert me to the glories of Norwich station in the 1950s
– and for that I'm grateful.

But if each time I saw him –
he kept going on and on about how wonderful it all was
(and how I ought to build one as well) –
it might mean I was always washing my hair, whenever he wanted to meet up.

But don't we have a Duty of Care – for other people's souls?

Isn't the purpose of the Church – to save people from hell?

Isn't the purpose of the Church – to save people from *themselves*?

Aren't we responsible – for getting the Gospel message out?

The problem is – that even if we are –

it's not at all straightforward – as to what that message might actually be.

What's central to it?

And what's peripheral?

What is the *irreducible core* of the Gospel?

And what are *mere details*?

There are those who would resist (almost to the death) any or all of the following–

(i) The ordination of women as priests.

(ii) The consecration of women as bishops.

(iii) The ordination of openly gay people as priests.

(iv) The consecration of openly gay people as bishops.

And that's because most (it not all) of us have got bottom lines.

Things that are (for us) – non-negotiable.

Things that constitute – the irreducible core of the way we make sense of the world.

For some it is the inerrancy of scripture –

which often also involves a literal understanding of the bible.

Fundamentalism like that –

invariably means a clarity of vision and a certainty of expression –

that many find attractive and persuasive –

and many others find repulsive and ridiculous.

Maybe faith can be thought of as being on a continuum –

like a jam doughnut.

Imagine some super-cheap, super-saver jam doughnuts –

and compare them with Waitrose's finest (at three times the price).

The super-saver ones are likely to have just a tiny bit of jam in the middle – surrounded by masses of plain dough.

Whilst the Waitrose ones have *enormous* quantities of jam – so that what is supposed to be simply the centre, occupies pretty well the whole thing.

With regard to faith –

some people have much bigger and jammier centres than others –

which means that they see pretty well *everything* as essential and non-negotiable.

Others can manage with far less jam –

and are much more relaxed about what matters and what doesn't.

For them – there's a tiny essential core –

and a large, far-less-important bit round the outside

Those at one end of the jam-spectrum –

would see belief in (for example)

the idea of a literal, six-day creation – as the foundation of everything.

Others, a bit further along –

might think in terms of six creation 'episodes' of indeterminate length.

Whilst the ones at the minimal-jam end –

would read the entire creation story as a beautiful myth

that acknowledges our ignorance of the whole process –

whilst expressing an indescribable and overwhelming sense –

of awe and wonder at it all.

But *wherever* they come on the jam-scale –

everyone who takes Christianity seriously

has a centre of *some* sort and *some* size (however tiny!) –

something that is *not* up for grabs.

It's *this* that constitutes our bottom line –

and one of the hardest parts of the faith journey is learning to accept –

that not only do different people have different bottom lines –

(different non-negotiable packages) –

but that each one has an integrity of its own.

We need to do all that we can –

to reinterpret and repackage the faith for our own time –

according to where our own bottom line is –

but then it's out of our hands –

and becomes make-up-your-mind time for those outside –

who have to decide whether they want to have anything to do with it – or not.

We need to do all that we can –

to make the faith accessible –

by not requiring people to put either their brains or their consciences on hold –

but then it's down to them.

It's not our job to water the faith down and down and down –

in the hope that *eventually* – it might (fingers-crossed!) become palatable –

to those who aren't interested in it – as it is as the moment.

The sad truth is – that *however reasonably and persuasively* the Gospel is presented –

there will be many (maybe the majority) who want nothing to do with it at all.

However clearly and intelligently the Gospel is presented –

it will *not* take root in many (maybe most) people's hearts.

And in the face of this, there's always going to be a temptation to dilute things a bit –

so as to make them a bit more palatable.

To sugar the pill a little.

To say that no – you don't actually *have* to make any major changes –
to your comfortable and self-centred lifestyle –
because (just like Brexit) –
when it comes to faith –
you really *can* have your cake and eat it!

The numbers game is very seductive –
in the same way that love of popularity and success is very natural.
But in religion it can be *really* dangerous – not least to our integrity.

When Paul talks about how –
'the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel' –

he's not referring to some kind of Satan-out-there figure.

A more accurate translation would be – 'the god who is this world' –
and his target may be those believers who have become slaves to convention.

Those whose Gospel – has no real cutting edge.

Those who are ever-so-comfortable – in their faith.

Those who use worldly standards – to measure spiritual achievements.

Because according to these criteria –

the best/most successful churches are the ones with the biggest congregations.

The ones who are clearly giving people what they want.

But on this reading – for Paul –

it's the *Church* which is often the problem;

it's the *Church* that too often gets in the way of faith;

it's the *Church* which is guilty of short-changing people –

by failing to make sufficient demands on them.

Is he right?

Is the Church guilty as charged?

Has it brought the price of faith right down –

so that it doesn't actually many any real spiritual demands on people at all –

but is (essentially) a social club –

which also does a bit of neighbourly good-works on the side?

If we were charged with being comfortable and smug in our faith –

how would we plead?

(and would we be found guilty?)

How often is our faith simply a matter of routine?

A case of going through the (*oh-so-familiar*) routine and motions?

What *do* we *expect* from it?

And is that what we get from it?

If it is – are we ambitious enough?

How much effort do we put into our spiritual lives?

(not in the sense that we're always doing churchy things –

but in the sense that we're always open to the unruly promptings of the Spirit)

Do we want faith on the cheap?

Are we shirking its challenges?

Are we failing to live up to its demands?

Paul didn't mince his words – and never tried to court popularity –

by watering down what following Jesus actually required of people.

And we need to do exactly the same.

To resist the siren-song – of getting the numbers up at all costs –

and make it clear that although Grace is free –

it's never cheap.

It makes real demands on us – and there *are* no short cuts.

Openness of heart and generosity of spirit *always* go together –

with those who give willingly of themselves –

also giving willingly of their substance as well.

A mean person could no more give generously –

than a generous person could give meanly.

With the only sort of giving that matters –

being that *of the self to the sacred*.

The money side of giving – is (by comparison) of minimal importance.

Money is only a symbol –

and whilst putting their hands deeply in their pockets is hard enough for some –

it's infinitely easier than –

Trying to live – without agendas.

Trying to live – without the protection offered by being part of a tightly-knit group.

Trying to live – in such a way that we look for the best in everyone we meet.

Trying to live – so as to be genuinely open to new understandings and perspectives

Trying to live – with the sort of availability to others and to everything –

that is without masks or pretence.

Trying to live – with the sort of naked honesty –

that refuses to hide behind convention –

(or the sort of self-deception that keeps truth at arms-length).

But a person who gives of himself in this way without reserve – is unusual –

almost to the point of uniqueness.

It's an integrity – that manifests itself – as a sort of holiness –

and shows just what is possible.

It's an integrity – that expresses itself – in complete and utter vulnerability –
to being hurt, to being mocked, to being excluded.

It's an integrity – that usually leads to a Cross of one sort or another.

But a person like that gives us a glimpse – of what human potential amounts to –
and shows us just how far *we* fall short.

A glimpse of what a transfigured life might look like –
and a reminder of the way we're prepared to make do – with *so* much less.

Our minds *are far too easily blinded* –
by all sorts of unimportant trivia.

All sorts of things – that distract us from the profoundly serious business –
of Seeking the Sacred, wherever it may be found.

Something, in T S Eliot's words – '*costing not less than everything*'.

And always yearning –
for some kind of Ultimate Transformation and Transfiguration.

The Church needs to move beyond its obsession with *numbers* –
to a focus on Mystery.

A focus on the sheer *inexpressibility* of God –
and the impossibility of achieving *any* kind of closure with regard to the Sacred.

Most members of most congregations are likely to find the prospect of that –
about as appealing (and as comprehensible) –
as a 10-year focus on a scale model of Norwich station.

But whilst my friend has never claimed that what he's doing –
is of any wider or deeper significance –
the Church claims such stuff to be its core business.

So maybe it's about time – we took it seriously?