

P.S.

A religion of mediocrity

THE POET T. S. ELIOT once said, “We know too much and are convinced of too little”. We live in an age of many facts and much education, yet it is an age which loves everything to be relative and which rejects the concept of absolute truth. There are many facts which most people would agree to be ‘true’, but they would not be the sort of thing that you would bother being ‘convinced’ about in the sense of being a passionate supporter.

The very sorts of truth that would be interesting enough to arouse ‘conviction’—the answers to the big questions of life—are the very ones that have been made relative. There are the ‘facts’ of science: fine; not many ordinary people would bother arguing about them. But other, deeper matters have been rendered unacceptable topics for discussion (they are not politically correct), or have been reduced to ‘true for you’ or ‘true for me’.

We, of all people, do have something to be convinced about. Ours need not be the kind of weak and anaemic mental life of which Eliot convicts society. But there is warning nonetheless in what he points out. For there is a danger that society’s ‘distancing’ of truth, and emotional and intellectual attachment to it, may have rubbed off on us. It is perfectly possible to carry on life as a Christadelphian, within its framework and habits, without being passionately committed. The question barely needs to be asked as to whether this is the sort of service that God is looking for.

Could it be that too much learning about other religions and forms of Christianity, too much media criticism of fundamentalism and religious extremism (in particular Islamic fundamentalism, given the fallout of 2001), has led us to be frightened of conviction?

Could it be that too many seminars (and I write this as a genuine supporter of that particular preaching medium) have made us imagine ourselves to be night-school lecturers rather than preachers of the gospel? Might we just as well be teaching A-level maths?

Has society’s ‘You have your view, I’ll have mine’ attitude led us to imagine that this is all we have—a ‘view’?

Are traditional lectures in danger of being unconvincing (even to our own internal audiences, ourselves or our children) because they have lost that intensity of conviction?

Has the process of our community becoming more intellectual, better educated and more middle class robbed us of our passion?

Being convinced of something, in the sense Eliot uses it at least, means that it matters deeply to you, and that it is more than merely the view you happen to take. Being convinced means that it makes a fundamental difference; that you would ‘fight’ for it (in at least a metaphorical sense), and prioritise it in your life; that you would not allow what it implies to be contradicted by the life which you lead.

Such thoughts lead naturally to questions about commitment. I remember something I once read in a book by C. S. Lewis which has left an indelible impression. He wrote this: “Christianity is not a religion of mediocrity”. Lewis’ statement is one which is exquisitely true. If we are convinced about the reality of what we believe, then our approach and our service cannot—dare not—be mediocre.

The concept of a mediocre disciple should be an oxymoron. What is our Lord looking for? Is he looking for people who are semi-convinced, people who have a ‘so-so’ interest in getting involved, people who are willing to give so much but no further, to give only until it starts to become inconvenient?

What, though, of the alternative? Does all this mean we are meant to be extremists, ‘religious extremists’? There is an understandable inclination to cringe away from those terms. They might not be the best terms to use to describe what we are, because of the connotations they carry.

But if it is a choice between mediocrity or extremism in terms of our commitment to God, then we ought to know where we stand. When Jesus said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father Which is in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48), he was not issuing a call to mediocrity. Perfection is an extreme, one to which our Lord would have us aspire.

It is too easy to take the norms of society (or even our brothers and sisters) and use them as the yardstick of how much commitment or conviction we should allow to be seen. But this is not the way. The one we measure ourselves against is our Lord. There is no greater extreme than completely rejecting sin in one’s life and being wholly wedded in one’s purpose to the will of the Father.

Let us not be concerned, then, about appearing one-dimensional, too narrow, or, indeed, too extreme. Christianity is not a religion of mediocrity. It is the highest and most extreme calling that there is.

Mark Vincent