

ADDRESSING AND CHALLENGING A CULTURE OF FEAR

Background

My parents were members of the Church of Ireland in Dublin where I was born and where I grew up. I read for a degree in Philosophy in Trinity College, Dublin. Then, after I had been accepted for ordination training for the Church of Ireland, I read for a degree in Theology in Cambridge University where I did further studies at Westcott House theological college. I found my theological training very challenging and exciting. Jack Good writing in *The Dishonest Church*. understands my experience well, he speaks of ordinands in general, " Their individual faith has developed, in most cases, after an intense and sometimes painful time of questioning, dismantling, and reconstruction."(1)

I left my childhood faith behind me in Cambridge, I had begun the life long process of developing a credible faith for life and ministry. As I have written in my recently published book, *Tried for Heresy A 21st Century Journey of Faith*, I had not expected that my understanding of Christianity would have been transformed in the way it was through my study in Cambridge.

"Little though, as I arrived in Cambridge, did I realise the struggles of conscience and the profound changes in my understanding of Christianity that would lie ahead in the next three years. I would cease to believe, in a literal sense, in Jesus as the Saviour of the world. I would no longer see him as both human and divine, in the sense required if it were to be claimed that God had entered our environment and become a human being. Should I have proceeded on the route to ordination? At the time it seemed to me, in the context of what I was taught, that this more metaphorical and symbolical understanding of Christianity was the way forward for the church. It kept the commitment to love and caring, whilst presenting it in a way that was fully in tune with modern knowledge. My spirituality changed in Cambridge, from being christocentric to being theocentric. I had moved from a devotional life very focused on Jesus to a meditative life, in which a sense of the mystery and unknowability of God were combined with an awareness of

my 'vision' of God as love: love without limits and love without end."(2)

I was ordained on 21st December 1972 (on what was then St Thomas' Day) in the Church of Ireland Church in Glencraig. I had found work as an assistant curate at St Mark's Church, Dundela, Belfast. The Troubles were at their worst. As I travelled on my small motorbike to visit members of the parish who were patients in the Royal Victoria Hospital or in other centre city ones, I was always glad to arrive home safely. I enjoyed my four years in Belfast very much and warmed to the people greatly. My relaxation in those days was playing hockey for YMCA where I had some good friends. However, as I record in my book, worry and anxiety often beset me because of my theological views. "Liberal theology was under attack and its proponents at this time were sometimes told that they were not true Christians, they should leave the church. I used to try to spend some time reading theology each morning and I continued to wrestle with the implications of liberal theology for the way Christianity was interpreted by the majority of people. In St Mark's I would listen to the more traditional sermons preached with sincere conviction by my three rectors and fellow curates, I felt an outsider. Particularly at Christmas and Easter, the liturgy focused on Jesus and the hymns spoke so literally about him being human and divine, God come to live a human life on earth. It continued to make me feel so uncomfortable. I arranged to go over to Oxford and visit both my former principal, Peter Walker, from my time at Westcott House, who was then a suffragan bishop in the Oxford diocese, and my former supervisor from Jesus College, Cambridge who was then an Oxford professor - the late Peter Baelz. Both encouraged me to stay on, and assured me that there were many others of a similar viewpoint, who also struggled with these issues of theology and conscience as I was doing."(3)

After Belfast, I returned to my home city of Dublin and worked there for six years. During most of those years I had the privilege of ministering as a hospital chaplain. Then I began a new chapter in my life by going to Zimbabwe where I stayed for eleven years, it was a fascinating experience, some of which I try to describe in my book. In 1994, I was in hospital chaplaincy ministry again, this time in Leeds, UK. However, three years later I had become the Dean of Clonmacnoise, and the Rector of the Trim and Athboy Group of Parishes, in the Diocese of Meath and Kildare.

"I was not expecting a turbulent time ahead of me."(4)

A controversial period

Throughout my ministry I have lived with the tension of feeling unable to fully share the richness of my theological training with the people I was seeking to serve. Sometimes in the course of a conversation, I discovered that a member of the parish, where I was working at the time, had been doing a good deal of their own searching and questioning. Maybe they had listened to a programme on radio or TV, or they had read a book that had challenged the way that they had interpreted their faith up to that point in time. I would find that I could well be more transparent with him or her about my own interpretation of Christianity. I have already referred to Jack Good's excellent book *The Dishonest Church*. His main argument is that clergy have gained a considerable amount of important theological knowledge while in training, but that they do not draw on it in their work in ministry, but revert to the more childlike faith that they had held prior to ordination training. He regards this situation as disastrous for the church and totally disrespectful of its lay membership.

"Here is the central issue: pastors and other trained professionals of the church often have developed a system of beliefs that is qualitatively different from the faith they communicate to local congregations. Their individual faith has developed, in most cases, after an intense and sometimes painful time of questioning, dismantling, and reconstruction. For reasons that are not clear, these leaders assume that local church members are either unwilling or unable to survive a similar process. So, in an act of dishonesty that threatens to erode the core of the church's mission, they hold one kind of faith for themselves while the literature they produce for the laity and the sermons they deliver assume another, basically different, style of faith for the non-professional."(5)

He discerns four main fears ◆ **Laity will react negatively if challenged to develop a more mature faith** ◆ **Clergy are afraid of letting laity think for themselves** ◆ **Exposing the human roots of religious tradition will mean it will lose its spiritual power** ◆ **Similarly the Bible will lose its power if exposed to criticism**

He believes that "facing our fears forces us to acknowledge the wrong-headedness of the church's desperate effort to avoid honest wrestling with faith."(6) He writes of people who as teenagers or as young adults became very estranged from their churches. What they were being taught in their church clashed with what they were learning in school, perhaps in science. He reports on one such person that "He was no longer willing to hear either his pastor or his parents tell him to accept dogma simply because it had been handed down from one authority figure to another. His sense of estrangement deepened."(7) Quite a number of years later this same person eventually found a church where the minister respected his desire to grow intellectually in his faith.

"This church ♦ was a place of faith, one that embraced secular knowledge as an aid to exploring the Mystery at the core of all that is. For the first time in his life ♦ [he] was in a spiritual environment where his questions, his commitments, and his spiritual quest were welcome" (8)

While I had talked to a number of my rectors that I was working with when I was a curate about my interpretation of the faith and my struggles with conscience and theology, and also to some of the bishops in the different dioceses where I was working, I had not spoken openly to fellow clergy until 1999 when I plucked up my courage and did so. I had been invited to read a paper to our local diocesan clergy group when I was Dean of Clonmacnoise and Rector of Trim and Athboy. My paper told the story of my faith development and all the worries and tensions surrounding it. Most of my fellow clergy were shocked, though they did not mount an opposition movement against me. In 2000, I read another similar paper to a group in Wales, and in 2001 I posted several radical articles, that I had written, on our newly constructed parish website. In a matter of months the media had discovered them and my bishop started to read through them with a fine toothcomb.

Some of my ideas on how I thought that a religion such as Christianity, that had come out of a pre-scientific and pre-critical world, needed to be modernised were outside the goalposts, he considered. In December 2001, he gave me three months of enforced leave of absence so that I could reflect on the serious concerns he had expressed to me about my stated beliefs. I was denounced as a scandal in the church by the

Archbishop of Dublin and the majority of my parishioners soon would argue that my ministry among them was unacceptable, they stated that I must leave the parish forthwith. To me the metaphor 'Christ has died for you' was a way of expressing a belief that we are found loveable, forgivable and reconcilable by God, but I did not consider that in a literal sense Jesus' death was a bearing of the punishment for all sin, or that in a literal sense he was God come to live amongst us as a human being.

"After the three-month period [of enforced leave of absence from my ministerial tasks] had elapsed, I was asked, in March 2002, to meet with Richard Clarke again. A few days later, I received his letter inviting me to resign, failing which, he would have no other recourse, he claimed, but to take the matter to the court of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland. I declined his invitation to resign. Among its membership the Church of Ireland has some laity, academics and clergy with similar views to mine, though not everybody wants to put his or her head above the parapet. These clergy are concerned, like I have been, about the consequences of being too explicit and transparent about a liberal interpretation of the faith. My neck was seen now by many as resting on the block; the guillotine had not been used for longer than most people could remember; the blade had become rusty and would need to be sent away to be sharpened. I did not myself believe that I deserved such a fate; others clearly did. I was angry and anxious, desperately uncertain about the future, but determined to fight. After an adjourned hearing of the court of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland, I very reluctantly changed my mind and decided, for various reasons, to resign ♦ I did so on 7th May 2002, just three days before the Court was due to sit again. Many people felt relieved; it felt to me as if I had signed my own death sentence. In my working life, I had not known anything else but to seek to serve as a priest. It looked as if I would need to seek a new identity, but what might that be? I remain a priest, but with no authority from a bishop to work as one, I have no licence authorizing me. It feels like being in limbo, people ask me - are you still a priest? I have to answer - well, yes and no! It doesn't sound right. It doesn't feel right either."(9)

An offering to the church

I doubt that I will find work again in an ordained capacity in the Church of Ireland. I have considered moving to another part of the Anglican Communion and people have suggested that I think of other denominations or religions. My bishop thought I should become a Unitarian or a Jew. My book *Tried for Heresy A 21st Century Journey of Faith* is in part an attempt to address and challenge a culture of fear that to my mind inhibits faith development for many people. Should you sometime read my book you will discover what I have been doing, apart from writing it, since I resigned on 7th May 2002 from my position as Dean of Clonmacnoise and Rector of the Trim and Athboy Group of Parishes. I have had a most fascinating, challenging and mind-stretching time and interacted with a group of most interesting people from fourteen different nations, we have been giving ourselves to the study of Peace, of conflict and reconciliation, of gender awareness and much more too. Where it will all lead to for me I am not sure, but I want to find some way to earn my living again and to make a small difference for good in the world if I can.

- 1 Jack Good, *The Dishonest Church*, Rising Star Press, CA, 2003, p9**
- 2 Andrew Furlong, *Tried for Heresy A 21st Century Journey of Faith*, O books, Hants, UK, 2003, p24**
- 3 Andrew Furlong, op cit. p27**
- 4 Andrew Furlong, op cit., p31**
- 5 Jack Good, op cit. p9**
- 6 Jack Good, op cit. p122**
- 7 Jack Good, op cit. p40**
- 8 Jack Good, op cit. p41**
- 9 Andrew Furlong, op cit., p9**

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