

New Kilpatrick
Jonah
6th November 2016

Radio 4 has a programme... which I think is called the Long View... that tries to imagine what the world would have been like... if... instead of the choices that were made then... a different one was made... and the consequences that followed from that...

Of course... such an exercise is hindsight fantasy... but it plagues humans... because living in hindsight... is a rather pessimistic place to live... unless we find a way of learning lessons... to shape what we do now... rather than have a life filled with regret...

There have been many such moments in the Church's life... where if we had followed another decision than the ones we did... we might have been quite a different kind of institution now... and have quite a different life of faith...

One such moment... possibly... was 660AD... when the Roman Empire was collapsing... and the Holy Roman Empire... the church... was taking over that role... and when in Britain... Iona based Celtic Christianity... was on the rise... and both Holy Roman Empire and Celtic Church... fought it out in a place called Whitby... over clothing... hair styles and the date of easter...

On such arguments as fashion, hair styles and easter... we don't find their consequences having faith changing influence on us today... but these... were just common touching places of two quite different world-views on faith...

The Roman Empire was as global as anything could be in those days... and as it imploded... the structures and belief in the powerful... shifted from the secular empire... to the Holy Roman Empire... It just took over what was already in place... which included the general views of societal structure and political authority...

Against this... the Celtic Church... was offering a quite different way of engaging faithfully in the world... where there was far more journeying in faith before belonging to the faith... far more ability to pilgrimage... to cross borders... and experience different landscapes as it were... before growing and evolving into faith...

The Roman Church... instead chose to impart the knowledge of the faith to people... in ready made packages... and accepting such packages of doctrine and creed... you became a member... You were a vessel to be filled with the right structure... doctrine... creed... belief... a package of belief... and once filled... you could be confirmed in our belief and then you belonged... and those who did not... were granted heretic status... enemies of the Holy Roman Church... and the consequences thereof...

This came to a head at the Council of Whitby... where the Roman way rather than the Celtic, Iona way... won the day... and the whole idea of crossing borders to explore faith... and the sense of journeying to find God in different landscapes... and to move as people of faith rather than root ourselves... was lost... and the institutional method of Rome... the filling of faith rather than the searching of faith... believing before belonging... became the method of choice for faith...

And there is a question today of what might the church have looked like... if the decision went in favour instead of Celtic Christianity rather than Roman... We will never know and we may have ended up just where we are now...

But the bible offers a story for us... where border crossing... and finding ourselves in new lands... is God's method of choice... The book is called Jonah... and the man is a prophet gone AWOL... whose core belief was more Roman than Celtic... that there were limits... borders... not to cross... and to go into foreign lands... beyond the empire to bring Good news on equal basis... rather than control such heathens... was anathema...

Jonah... was good on his feet... and ran in the opposite direction... and chose not to expand his faith... or set God's love free... Control of knowledge about God... was high on the agenda for Jonah... as if has often been in the church... that God's words in foreign hands... will ruin... will ruin... Well, will ruin what??

My comfortable understanding... my worldview...?

Jonah... the sermon... for Jonah is a sermon rather than a historical story... and makes sense more as such... was written as polemic against a world-view that narrowed God... and was a challenge to see God's Good News... as universal... to be shared with others... not of this empire... and on equal footing...

This is something Jonahites never cope with... a worldview bigger than their own theology... bigger than their own experience of God... bigger than their own version of the church...

Jonah belonged to the Holy Roman Empire... while God felt more at home in the method of Celtic Christianity...

Now of course... neither of these statements can be true as Jonah was long before either... but perhaps the hyperbole makes the point... Jonah and the impossible fish... hyperbole again... tells us... crossing borders... physical for Jonah... spiritual... social... traditional for us... is where faith expands... rather than dilutes... is where God grows... rather than shrinks with familiarity... is where the church renews... rather than rearranges itself like deckchairs on the boat Jonah sails away on...

Crossing borders... with a faith that does not break when it is given the chance to expand... and finding God's words equally as relevant and loving to those outside the borders of tradition... is the... reluctant... invitation... of the reluctant prophet... who has still to accept the Good News of God... is universal... rather than parochial...