

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

Matthew 1.21.

We keep hearing horrendous stories of people in GB not being able these days *publicly* to say they are Christians. Keep your Christianity quiet like a dirty secret, we are told. You can get the sack nowadays for wearing a cross. You can be arrested for quoting the Bible in the street. Recently an autistic street preacher was awarded compensation for being falsely arrested by West Midlands Police simply for proclaiming the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality and other sins. Nurses in the NHS get the sack for offering to pray with patients. A couple of years ago we were privileged to have Dr Patrick Sookhdeo of the Barnabas Fund come to tell us of how our brothers and sisters in Christ are being persecuted in other countries by people of other faiths. It is deeply ironic that now that Saddam Hussein is no more, the Christians of Iraq who have been there for nearly 2000 years face extinction, because Saddam actually protected the Christians from Islamists. Now they are fair game, as they are, for instance, in Pakistan. There are 3m Christians in Pakistan among a population of 165m Muslims. In November a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, was sentenced to death for blaspheming Mohammed. I was horrified to hear people in her village say that even if she is acquitted, they will kill her. The hatred in their hearts and the glee on their faces was awful to behold. We need to pray for her, and them. If this persecution of Christians is happening in faraway lands, it seems now that it is commonplace here in secular Britain.

But before we wind ourselves up into some hysteria, is it actually true? For a start, right up at the top, our Queen is a practising Christian. So is the PM. The last Census in 2001 found that in England and Wales only 2.7% were Muslims, and 1% were Hindus, with a whopping 73% claiming to be Christians. Actually, Egypt which you think of as being a Muslim country, is more multi-faith than GB. Here only 5% are of other faiths. Egypt has a huge 10% Christian population. So let's not get talked into this multi-faith nonsense, and allow ourselves to be brow-beaten into thinking Christianity is dead. It is not.

Let me talk from my own personal experience. In thirty years of ministry I have received nothing but respect wherever I go. I am given the title 'Reverend', and my experience is that people do treat me with reverence. When I go to hospitals, even in the poorest areas, strangers greet me with, 'Morning, Father'. For years now I have been teaching 16-year old Junior Soldiers. I'm not saying they are all born-again Christians, but they listen to me with respect. When I ask them what they think of compulsory company church services, they say, 'All right, Padre'. From time to time I have Muslim Junior Soldiers. None of them has ever been offended by my presence as a Christian. In fact I have never come across a Muslim offended by Christians. It is secular atheists who have appointed themselves as *spokesmen* for Muslims who claim that they are offended by Christianity. This is deeply patronising. Muslims can speak for themselves, and they are grown up people who won't shrivel up at the sight of a crucifix.

This 'Christianity is dead', and this 'Christianity is offensive to people of other faiths' exists only among the liberal elite who are to be found in the BBC, the universities and certain newspapers. They are the tiny apex of a huge pyramid. They are hugely powerful but massively unrepresentative. We mustn't be brow-beaten by them.

Like the sad person I am, I still receive the local Fermanagh newspaper, the improbably named *Impartial Reporter*. Here is a full-page spread on the local police commander, Inspector Roy Robinson. He lived through the Enniskillen and the Omagh bombs. The piece is entitled *God's peace was with me, so I was ready to die*. He had been diagnosed with cancer. Later in the article he pointed to the date May 19, 1982.

*That was when I gave my trust in the Lord Jesus Christ at a rally in Dungannon. Before I would have gone along to my place of worship just to be seen. But in the police I realised if anything happened to me I wanted an assurance that I would go to heaven.*

Now can you imagine the local police commander speaking so openly here in GB - or rather, being *invited* to speak so openly here in GB? Why not? Not because the people don't want to know, but because the elite who control the media don't want us to know. They are powerful but not representative.

Now, why am I saying all this? Because, despite the picture the elite want us to believe is the situation in GB, there is a lot more going on in our country spiritually than you would think. There are deep longings in our people for meaning, purpose and significance. They are reaching out, because they need to know that there's more to life than this. We are more than just dust in the wind. Unfortunately some

find it in drugs and alcohol. Others will look in crystals, tarot cards, and Zen meditation. But the fact is that they are looking. And they desperately need to find. We all know that things and consumerism do not make life worth living.

We are hard-wired to reach out for something bigger than us. In that famous chapter 3 of *Ecclesiastes* which begins 'to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born and a time to die ...' there is a profound revelation from God which says:

*[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

When St Paul visited Athens, he noted all the altars to the God and one in particular to 'THE UNKNOWN GOD'. Paul recognised that we *all* have these eternal longings, reaching out of ourselves. Turn to p1113, *Acts* 17.24-28...

We all have these longings. Most of our people don't go to church, not because they are hardened atheists, but because they are a bit lazy, they have better things to do on a Sunday, and they don't want some bore like me troubling their consciences and telling them what to do. Perhaps we're too comfortable here in GB, but we still feel this spiritual need. So did the Athenians, and that's why he told them, To this Unknown God of yours I am now going to give a name, v23...

This God we all feel is not just an 'It', 'Him Upstairs', a 'Higher Power', the 'First Cause'. He has a name - Jesus. This vaguely felt God has a face - Jesus's face. And that's what Christmas is about. In that humble manger God has shewn us his face and given us his name, so we can know him now.