

St Luke's in the City

Celebrating at the Crossroads **16TH Sunday after Pentecost, 16 September 2007**

Dear Friends,

THEOLOGY is not a dirty word! In fact, without a healthy and intelligently-engaging theology all we have is unreflective religion – which can certainly be a health hazard, as Jesus warns time and again in the gospels. It is a tragic indictment when church elders are heard to warn some young person of the dangers of studying theology – ‘It’ll destroy your faith, you know!’ What this supposed warning really betrays is infantilism, unconsciousness, and possibly a deep-seated fear of being exposed. Such a warning amounts to saying something like: ‘If you study theology your unexamined and unconscious assumptions will be exposed, your small individual worldview will meet the wisdom of a wider world, you will be required to grow and mature in your faith. Avoid theology, therefore, and you will be able to keep your Sunday School religion intact and unquestioned (just like me).’ This is seriously misguided advice, and ultimately poisonous for the individual as well as for the mission of the church. I doubt that the church has yet honestly faced up to the scale of the scandal against Christ’s mission, and the incalculable damage caused to persons, as a consequence of the perpetuation of Sunday School religion in adults. Robust and healthy theology is essential for all of us – people like me may have more time for the enterprise, but just as we are right to affirm the priesthood of all believers, so rigorous theology is essential to all the baptised.

Theology is not – contrary to popular opinion – a body of rational facts delivered ready-made ‘in toto’ from on high. When the story of Moses receiving the commandments on Mount Sinai is concretised this is what the reductive mind comes up with. Theology is in fact a natural response to life. That is to say, it is always experience which comes first. Creation came first – then humans theologised. First we have an encounter – with the cosmos, with the natural world, with one another, with ourselves – and then we try to make some sense of it. This is theology in its most basic form. This is the question the small child asks when their parent dies suddenly or brutally. An infant theology is probably universal – is there anyone who does not ask such questions, and come up with some ‘formula’ which can explain or make safe a bitter or frightening experience? But infant theology tends to settle on just one response, and can insist on one response for all time and for all people. If this infant theology is absolutised as a bulwark against life’s complexity and plurality this usually produces unconscious split-personalities, who are frequently dogmatic and oppressive. A theology fit for adults is open to the wide winds of the Spirit who blows where it will, and frees the individual to attend to life as it is actually experienced. This is why theology is so important. Christians do not ‘learn theology’, rather we learn to think theologically, to reflect on things as they are, in the light of the Scriptures. Our communal task is to think theologically at these crossroads.

With my love,
David