

St Luke's in the City

Celebrating at the Crossroads **17th Sunday after Pentecost, 23 September 2007**

Dear Friends,

THINKING theologically, I said last week, does not consist in merely acquiring a collection of facts - not possessing a body of solidified formulas, texts and doctrines, as though we were a technician confronted by a broken machine armed with a tool box and instruction manual. There are some facts, and there are certainly a great many theories and models for God, but by its very essence the enterprise we call theology is always tentative, never absolutely certain. God remains in God-self ultimately beyond our best efforts to define. To say that God is 'Father', for instance, for the sake of humility must immediately be followed by saying but neither is God A father, nor does the metaphor of father exhaustively explain or define God in God-self. A great many other such cautions could be raised. This, no doubt, is a cause for frustration for those who are looking for certainties and simple answers. From time to time it is said that Anglicans appear to have no clear belief on any subject. It is true that Anglican theology has always exhibited a cautious reticence when it comes to defining doctrines. But it is merely ignorant caricature to suggest from this that Anglicans believe in nothing at all. It is not a lack of belief, rather a very firm commitment to a very fundamental and particular orthodox belief - in the incomparable and awesome mystery of God, and the accompanying awareness of the limits of human understanding. This means that we dare not prematurely pontificate, infallibly, where even angels fear to tread! And as I have noted earlier in this series it means that we Anglicans put our best efforts into the expression of our faith in forms of worship, in the liturgy, rather than opt for formulas and definitions, common in both Latin and Protestant circles. Eucharistic action, not rationalistic confessional statement, is at the heart of who we are.

Time and again the Jesus of the gospels is revealed as one who attends to the facts. His fiercest and most sustained conflicts are with those religious persons who are the self-appointed defenders of ready-made doctrines and formulas, perversely refusing to attend to the facts, employing their doctrines like bludgeons. Jesus, by contrast, though he is well-school in the law and prophets, meets with people, enters their homes, eats with them, considers the messy and joyous circumstances and events of peoples' actual lives. Confronted by a crippled person on the holy day it is this synthesis of doctrine and facts that enables Jesus to declare that the Sabbath was made for people, not the other way around. Thinking theologically always produces liberation. "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven [ie. those who think theologically] is like a householder who brings out of their treasure what is new and what is old." (Matthew 13:52) Arguably, the most urgent theological thinking required of all Christians at these 21st century crossroads is to take seriously the relatively new facts, unknown to the Biblical writers, of being creatures at home on a finite planet in a staggeringly-vast and evolutionary cosmos.

With my love,
David