

28th August
Martin Camroux:

KEEPING UP WITH JESUS

The other day I went walking around the site in Crystal Palace where Queen Victoria's Great Exhibition after they moved it here in 1854. It was the wonder of the age – a great iron and glass structure 3 times the size of St Paul's Cathedral. Go back there now and all there is a few rather sad terraces, the odd statue and a few not entirely correct models of dinosaurs

Times change. Worlds move on. I've just finished re-reading Anthony Trollope "Can you forgive her?" which was written just after time of the Great Exhibition opened. It was before dating apps. Its heroine Alice vacillates between two young men. She accepts an offer of marriage from one before realizing that really she loved another. She says "You do not know how vile I have been. For a woman to promise herself to a man when she loved another. I shall never cease to reproach myself. I have done that which no woman can do and honour herself afterwards. I have been a jilt. I am a fallen woman". Times change, world move on. Perhaps more typical of our time is the advert in a newspaper in Oklahoma City put in by the Rev Billy Clegg. "Marriage counselling. Guaranteed results. Extremely low rates. Money back if divorced within 6 months".

Times change. Worlds move on. I came here in 1991. I was a young fresh minister. Eleanor was 3 and Michael one. Last week Eleanor treated me to the Lord's test. Every tube we went on someone stood up and gave me a seat.

Sometimes the changes are for the better. The average life expectancy in the world today – 72. I was born in 1947 – the year India became independent. What was the average life expectancy in 1947 – 32. At independence in India 12% could read, now its 74%. What a change for the better. But not all change is good like climate change. And sometimes good changes turn out not to be as permanent as you hoped. Barak Obama is elected President of the US – a black man – wonderful. Then what they do? Elect Donald Trump. But some things don't change – let me give you a text. Hebrews chapter 13 v 8. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever".

What do we actually know about Jesus? He came from Nazareth, a nondescript town in Galilee, in the north of Palestine. He was a builder, a carpenter. At about the age of thirty, he fell under the influence of a prophet by the name of John, was baptized by him, and started a ministry in Galilee. He taught in synagogues; he healed the sick; he challenged the conventional rules of his religion. He spoke with authority, people said. Crowds began to gather wherever he went: synagogues, small villages, even the countryside by the Sea of Galilee. He fed people—fed them with food and fed their deepest hungers. He would welcome anybody, it seemed, and his inclusivity irritated and finally enraged religious and political leaders. So they killed him. Three days later he appeared to friends, and the rest is history.

Some things you can say with absolute certainty about him He was a man of extraordinary goodness. That's without question. I read the Times. One of the reasons I read it because I love the freshness and honesty of Matthew Parris. He's an Anglican but not a Christian. He doesn't believe in God, but he goes to the Church "I love both the story and the person of Jesus, who I'm convinced was a real and wonderful man". That's without doubt.

28th August
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No one puts this better than Charles Wesley “Jesus thou art all compassion – pure unbounded love thou art”.

It’s equally certain that he saw his ministry as bringing change into the world. He broke down barriers, barriers, between male and female, Greek and Jew, Jew and Samaritan. It was typical of him to make a Samaritan, a man of a different race and a different religion the hero of one of his greatest parables. He looked for a new kind of living. You have heard it was said You’re heard don’t murder, But I say if you’re angry with your brother that’s wrong. You have heard it said “Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”. He called this change the coming of the kingdom of God - an alternative to the violence and suffering and poverty that characterize daily life; it’s a vision of kindness, compassion, gentleness, and peace. Blessed are you who are hungry for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep, will laugh. Alex McCowan once said, “something amazing happened in Galilee two thousand years ago.”

But Times change, world’s move on. What seemed yesterday good yesterday doesn’t always seem so good today. The other day I was at the wonderful Dyrham Park near Bristol. If any of you been watching Sanditon, it’s the great house where Lady Denham lives. It was built by William Blathwayt was secretary for the colonies and got a huge corrupt fortune out of kickbacks from west Indian plantation owners. Built out of blood, exploitation, corruption, slavery. . Not so good. As you look back you notice things. Martin Luther was the great Protestant hero, but he said synagogues should be burnt down. St Paul – well I love St Paul but when he says slaves obey your masters and women to keep quiet – that was his time not ours. All periods of history have their moral blind spots just as we undoubtedly have ours.

But what about Jesus? Where are his moral blind spots? Well, Jesus was a man of his time not ours.. As is inevitable he certainly used some phrases and concepts which have not always lasted well. I think he expected the kingdom of God to come quicker than it has. But the amazing thing for me little his moral vision has dated.

For fifteen years Harvey Cox taught a course at Harvard University called ‘Jesus and the Moral Life’. It was one of the most popular in the University often enrolling over 1000 students a term including Jewish and non-religious students as well as Christians of various kinds. Often, they would argue with him and among themselves. But then he would come to the climax of the Sermon on the Mount, the section on forgiveness which begins, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:43-45). Over the years Cox says he found the students did not want to argue about this.

So eventually, when I reached these verses in class, I simply paused after I read them. Invariably there was a profound silence in the room. Why offer a commentary on the

28th August
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Mona Lisa? If the Sermon on the Mount was Jesus' Fifth Symphony this was his central theme. Why say more? Commenting on it, or even discussing it, seemed almost superfluous. It still does.

Times change. Worlds move on. But Jesus is still ahead of us. There is barely a recorded encounter of Jesus in the Gospels where he is not crossing some form of social or religious barrier in order to empower people and confront prejudice. He is open to women and to the socially and racially excluded. Or look at his parables, The Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the sheep and the goats - are they any less challenging than they were?. Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow,

He is still ahead of us - offering us a moral vision we have not yet reached.

Listen as he says that whoever receives a little child receives him and the God who is in him.

Listen as he says love your enemy.

Listen as he says love your neighbour.

Listen as he tells a story about a neighbour, wounded, lying by the road, and the Good Samaritan who stops and helps.

Listen as he says forgive those who hurt you, turn the other cheek to those who strike you.

Listen as he says if you give your life away for my sake, you will find it.

Listen as from the Cross he says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"

Listen as he says do not be afraid, for I will be with you always, to the end and beyond.

Times change, worlds move on. We've become a very small world. A bug in Wuhan devastates life everywhere. A war in Ukraine causes devastation around the world. We're a multi-cultural county. I'm told there are 260 languages spoken – and that only on the average bus. What's the need in this kind of world? Listen to Martin Luther King. We need "A world-wide fellowship that lifts neighbourly concern above ones own tribe, race, class and nation". Where do we find that? Jesus teaches us to pray, "Our father who art in heaven" Our father. All of us. No distinctions. Paul draws the obvious conclusion. "In Christ there is neither Greek or Jew, slave not free, male not female, for You are one in Christ Jesus".

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever". Always challenging. Always one step ahead. Our challenge is to keep up with him.

28th August
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Dear God, we come here because we need a reminder that you are; that you are mysteriously present in the midst of this perplexing world of ours; a reminder that you know and care about what happens in the world and that you know and care about us. So speak that reminder to us in this time together. Startle us once again with your truth, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.