

St.Lawrence January 3 2021 I wonder...

The year 1933 was a year of worldwide suffering and depression – it was one of those years that eventually came to be looked back on as the Great Depression. Hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world suffered financial, mental, emotional and physical disaster. Sound familiar?

It was in that year that a musician, John Jacob Niles, was travelling round the Appalachian mountains, collecting folk music. In one town he came across a travelling preacher and evangelist, Preacher Morgan. This man and his family lived in a caravan, living on the edge of poverty, living the kind of impoverished lifestyle that had them branded by the authorities as a ‘public nuisance’.

John Niles wandered over to their caravan to hear this man preach, trying to raise money to buy enough petrol so that he could be run out of town with at least some dignity. What attracted Niles, though, was a little girl from the family who was walking around singing “I wonder as I wander out under the sky how Jesus, the Saviour, did come for to die for poor or’nerly people like you and like I”. That was all. Niles was so entranced by this poverty-stricken little girl’s singing that he tried to get her to sing some more, but she didn’t know any more. So over a period of time he set about writing more of the tune and extra words himself. That’s how a particular Christmas song was born, a song which has become of great significance and importance to a surprisingly wide range of people throughout the world.

I hadn’t realised just how important and significant a song it has been to so many people until I stopped to listen one morning recently to one of the Soul Music programmes on Radio 4. One of the benefits of ‘lockdown’ for many of us has been that we have stopped and actually listened to things like that. Earlier we would probably have simply kept it on as background noise while we got on with the dozen and one things we felt we had to do every day.

As I listened, I was equally surprised to hear just what it was that had struck and inspired people about this song. It was that the simple naivety of the words somehow reflected their own often quite anguished search for the meaning and purpose of life. That little girl was singing “I wonder...”; not “I’m sure, I’m certain...”, but I wonder – in contrast, perhaps, to her preacher father’s apparent certainty.

That song was, it seems, giving people permission and encouragement to doubt, to question, to wonder. Some said that it had felt to them as though a burden of guilt was being lifted off their shoulders. One of them said how he had pondered just what kind of theology was enshrined in that song. What uplifted him was that here he had found a non-doctrinal theology, a theology of questioning rather than a theology of doctrinal certainty, a theology of doubt.

Of course, that little girl, in the innocent honesty of her childhood was particularly wondering “Why?” Why does good always have to be accompanied by bad? Why did Jesus have to be born to die? Why couldn’t he just be born to enjoy life and live to healthy old age? Why does God allow, and even, at times, appear to encourage suffering and unhappiness? Why can’t life just be fun, enjoyable, a pleasure from beginning to end? These were the kind of questions the folk I was listening to had previously believed it was wrong to ask, foolish, lacking in wisdom and maturity, but here was a simple song that put into words what had always been at the back of their minds anyway, unspoken, unreleased, yet eating away at them all the time like a sort of spiritual cancer.

I hope you have found that amongst the variety of clergy you have here at your disposal and unusually perhaps for such an assortment of attitudes, outlooks and ages there has been one message that has consistently come from us all. Namely, even through our own expressions of conviction and faith, that it is not just alright to question and to wonder, just as we ourselves do, but that it is actually important, perhaps even crucial for the development of faith. That’s something you will have heard from Angela, from Guy, from Peter, from Maxine and from myself.

And not only that it is good to question ‘why’, but also even to question ‘whether’. Much of our faith, for example, is based on and expressed in story. Jesus was born in a stable to a virgin. Really? I wonder. Shepherds saw and heard a choir of angels singing ‘glory to God in the highest’. Lovely - but honestly? I wonder. On Wednesday this week we will be celebrating and thoroughly enjoying the story of the Epiphany. Wise men travel from afar to bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, symbolising King, God, Sacrifice, to a baby whose birth had been foretold in ancient writings, guided to his

birthplace by a star, or conjunction of stars. Do ponder over the meaning of that visit and those gifts this Wednesday at the Festival of the Epiphany.

But as we celebrate, I wonder. Did that beautiful story really happen? Have faith and belief become vehicles for godly and entertaining invention?

In the 1950's, I studied Theology at Cambridge. It was the era of challenging and often disturbing Christian thinkers - John Robinson of 'Honest to God' fame; Peter Ackroyd, Hugh Montefiore, Charlie Moule, all of them leaders in the field of Biblical criticism and scholarship. Nothing was too sacred to question, too holy to take apart and to examine critically. Thirty percent of the students in the Divinity Faculty, mostly from the same 'evangelical' background as my own, couldn't take it. They left the course, largely because they had been trained to believe that to question what was perceived to be 'from God' was to renege on the very God who had come to die for our sins. Whilst still on the course they would gather outside the rooms of our tutors to pray for their conversion from such sinful wickedness to the true faith. To wonder as you wander in that way was to turn your back on the Christ whom you professed to follow. They prayed for me before we went in.

My own experience was then and has continued to be that to be honest enough to express doubt and questioning and, indeed, to share them with the very God who may be the subject of that questioning leads not to a weakening but to a strengthening of faith, even, perhaps especially, if you are prepared to accept that the questioning could lead you to reject the very 'Truth' which has been the basis of your faith in Christ. "There is more faith in honest doubt" wrote the poet Tennyson "believe me, than in half your creeds".

"I wonder, as I wander out under the sky, why Jesus our saviour should come for to die." I'm afraid this life is not always going to offer us a good ending or an easy way out. Why does God allow such pain, such suffering, such sadness? Ask him. Question him. Doubt him. Tell him your doubts.

Be assured that those things you searchingly and honestly question as you wander out under your sky are, almost by definition, the things that you value and treasure most, and, deep within yourself, they are the things that you hold most dear - were it not so they wouldn't be worth the anguish of questioning and wondering.