

Working Backwards and Forwards
Pentecost Sunday
31/5/2009

When the Episcopal Bishop of Chicago laid hands on Alan Watts in the immediate post war years he could have had little idea of the stormy petrel ministry he had launched on the public. As a university chaplain Alan Watts was popular and effective. Clouds of incense accompanied Services of well-choreographed catholic ceremonial, interspersed with brief, dramatic sermons, and long periods of silent contemplation. An arresting speaker and a lively personality, he drew many to the chaplaincy. The trouble was, as his wife and his Bishop found out, he couldn't resist spreading his love around some of the attractive young women in his flock. This brought about the abrupt termination of a very promising ministry.

But after going to ground for a few years Watts re launched himself in California as the apostle of Zen Buddhism to the West. His timing was propitious, the zeitgeist was with him, and his books and lectures caught the popular mood. The Churches helped him too, indirectly, by concentrating hard on being relevant, and by neglecting their rich spiritual inheritance. This left the field open for those who would point to the East as the source of spiritual wisdom.

Zen Buddhism, with its promise of instant enlightenment, has retained its popularity over the years, but like many wow factor religions it is worth asking, what enduring ideas or insights has it projected into the popular imagination?

Living in the present moment with all that you have got would be my pick of what we have received from this quarter. Not wasting our psychic energy on regrets and longings for what might have been in the past. Not being buffeted by desire and fear as we anticipate the future. Instead, attending to the what is, rejoicing in its simplicity and wonder, with a disciplined contemplative gaze. Taking in reality with an unyielding attention that does not get lost in fantasy, and that accepts the transient nature of beauty. To live like this is to experience the reality of William Blake's words, "He who kisses a joy as it flies, lives in eternity's sun rise."

There is a truth in this which all of us could take on board for our psychological health and emotional well being. But consider this - the only creatures that truly live in the here and now are animals. We of course are animals, but ones endowed with imagination and memory. Do we really want to forgo these wonderful gifts and live, as they say, as happy as a pig in muck?

What most religions exist to do is to bring about a state of inner transformation. Describing that inner transformation in words is a challenge for any religious writer. Luke seizes on outward phenomena and symbols to do the job. When Jesus is baptised in the Jordan he has a Dove appear to represent the Spirit. Today we heard about tongues of fire resting on the apostle's heads, and their speaking of foreign languages as the Spirit gives them the gift of speech.

Luke is sparing of the details, odd really given how important this event is for us, and how central it is in the imagination of the Church. In a few lines a tremendous fact is put in front of us. The power of

what happened to Jesus at the resurrection has now moved into the lives of his immediate followers, empowering them to be for others what he was for them.

But Luke doesn't linger over the supernatural details. He presses on and draws our attention to the names of all the countries that the Jews in Jerusalem have come from. The audience for this remarkable simultaneous translation missionary sermon are the Jews who live in the dispersion right across the known world. The promises bound up in Jesus, the restorer of his people, are reaching out across the world and into the future. The power of the Spirit is working forwards - changing lives, shaping events, bringing about remarkable results. This is just the start. There is a parallel with what happened at the first descent of the Spirit in Luke Acts, at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. No sooner has Jesus been baptised, and just before he goes off into the wilderness to be tempted, a very puzzling literary device is interposed. We are treated to a long genealogy of Jesus stretching back to Adam.

Is this family history gone mad? No, we are learning something important about the operations of the Spirit. What Jesus is about to say and do will be transmitted back down the generations, both fulfilling the promises made back then, and revealing the past in a new light. The pedigree of Jesus is rooted in the family history of the entire people of God, a story that is now re-interpreted by the start of his ministry. What Jesus does through the power of the Holy Spirit flows back down the generations to bring new life there also.

As we have come to Church this morning we have put ourselves in the hands of the God who works backwards and forwards. Sure, he is present in the here and now. We need to attend with the best of our attention to truly meet him in this Service. But through the power of his Spirit he is able to attend also to the other time dimensions of our lives.

If we want to we can travel back into the recalling of things of the past – the places and events that need healing and reinterpreting – the internal inheritances that need strengthening and sorting out. We too have a genealogy stretching back across the generations that could be helpfully re framed in the bigger story of Christ's dealing with us and our family.

We can and must go forward with the Spirit's wind in our sails into a future that we embrace without dread, or anxiety, or a de energised passivity. "May the power that is within you do far more than you dare ask or imagine." That promise in Ephesians is a Pentecost promise for us to claim as individuals and as a Church. The God who works backwards and forwards will not let us down in time past or time future.