

CHANGING WORLD - CHANGING CHOICES

**Key Note Speech to a conference on 17th April 2004
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My wife was in the food department of Marks and Spencers the other day, just after the whole department had been replanned. It was full of lost and angry people, cursing those who for no apparent reason had changed everything round. Where, O where, are the fish-fingers? Or - ultimate horror - have fish-fingers been discontinued? Too much change too quickly leads to bewilderment especially among those of us who are getting older. Listen closely to the conversation of the over 70s and you will find a recurring complaint: 'Things aren't what they used to be!' Thank heaven for that', say the younger generation, 'or we would all die of boredom.'

Both are right, of course. We need both stability and change. But how to balance them is not easy, particularly in a church context, Churches tend to be rather conservative bodies - even if they think they are not. They are right to be conservative, in that we really do need a sense of stability, if we are to know who we are and what we stand for. But we also need a sense of adventure and a willingness to change, if we are to be true to a living God. So how do we combine these? Let me take you to a famous quotation from one of the great theologians of the 19th century, Cardinal Newman. 'Truth is the daughter of time. To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.'

Newman can help us explore the significance of change, because it is to him that we owe the first attempt by a major Christian theologian to work out a theory of how the Christian faith develops over time. He did it at a crisis in his own life in 1845, when he was moving from the Church of England to the Roman Catholic Church. His difficulty was that the Church to which he was attracted, and which he felt in his bones was the most authentic, was just gearing up to pronounce new dogmas about the Virgin Mary. So how could he defend it as being authentic, when in practice it looked so different from the Church as described in the New Testament? If God has revealed himself in Scripture, what grounds have we for going beyond Scripture, even to the point of proclaiming new dogmas as necessary parts of the faith?

It is a dilemma which to some extent faces all Christians. All of us claim, in one way or another, that our faith is based on Scripture. But that doesn't stop us from sometimes interpreting it in wildly different ways. So how are we to judge? Listen to Newman again. 'Truth is the daughter of time.' The times and circumstances we live in make a difference. 'To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.' That sounds a bit like the theory of evolution, but Newman was writing before Darwin, and he was not the kind of man to be influenced by scientific theories or current opinion. He did, however, see the passage of time as essential for drawing out the implications of what was originally revealed. Just as life entails change and growth, so the living body of the Church has to change and grow by learning from experience. It may trust in guidance from the Spirit, but development is only valid if it can be seen to be in continuity with its beginnings. The faith, in other words, is grounded in what God has revealed, but this has to be understood, safeguarded and expressed in constantly changing historical circumstances. The gulf between the early church and a complex modern church may at first sight seem unbridgeable but Newman was convinced that he could see a family likeness persisting through all the changes, just as a child's face

may be recognised in a fully grown adult. There may be mistakes and misunderstandings along the way, but even heresies may have their value, said Newman, because they force the Church to think through more clearly what it is actually claiming as truth.

Newman's theory of development was full of unresolved problems, and few people at the time regarded it with much enthusiasm. Its great merit, however, was that it exposed a real problem, and it is a problem which is just as relevant for us today, though in a rather different form. His problem was a personal one - how to explain change given the changing characteristics of the Church whose faith he was embracing. Our problem today, and it is common to all churches, is how to maintain our Christian identity through the torrent of change and new choices, intellectual, social, and moral, which threaten to overwhelm us in a rapidly changing world.

Newman looked at the long sweep of history and saw change and development as a continuous process. This way of looking at our faith is now commonplace, and as modern believers we have no excuse for failing to recognise how much all of us have been shaped by our separate histories. Our special dilemma today is that changes happen so quickly, so publicly, and often with such destructive force, that there is not enough time to separate truth from falsehood. We are easily bemused by intellectual fashion. But Newman, I suggest, is still relevant. He can help us to see change as something natural, inevitable, and potentially productive. It is a sign of life. Change, merely for the sake of change, shows lack of respect for what we have received from the past. But change which takes seriously the times and circumstances in which we live, may be the only way of retaining the essential core of the faith. Just as a living body can only remain the same by constant change and renewal in all its organs and tissues, so the body of faith constantly has to find new forms of expression if it is to be true to its origins.

How we cope with this depends a good deal on how we think about the Bible. If Scripture is thought of as having dropped straight down from heaven, so that all Christians need to do is to look up the right answers and instructions in the Maker's Manual, then no change or development is possible. But the Bible, I suggest, cannot sensibly be regarded as that kind of book. It too belongs within history. It is a series of stories and encounters and insights, which changed people's lives by exposing them to the reality of God; and it speaks to us by enabling us to see our own lives and circumstances in the light of what they experienced. But for this to happen we need to understand them in their own times, and interpret what they went through from the perspective of our times. That is how the Bible goes on being a constantly renewed and developing source of revelation. Truth is the daughter of time. There is not just one single way of expressing God's truth. It has to be identified, and thought through, and lived out in the actual circumstances of our time and place. Why? Because in this life we cannot know God face to face, but only through a glass darkly. We have to walk faithfully within that bit of life where we are now, and there is no way of standing back to see the whole picture. This is why a living faith must never stop exploring.

To live is to change, but not to change so utterly that we lose hold of what God has already given us. That is why we need both stability and adventurousness. The point is that change is not to be feared. If handled well it can open up new depths in our faith. It is not a question of being relevant or fashionable, but of being real, real in the situation in which we find ourselves, as well as open to what has been given us in revelation, in tradition, in our relationships with one another, and by the ever-present grace of God. The desire for stability and familiarity is not wrong. It is our home base. But as TS Eliot put it, 'Home is where one

starts from... ‘

So how as Christians do we live in a world where so many landmarks are disappearing, so much is questioned, and the sheer speed of change and the variety of choice is so disorientating? We might find some clues to the nature of the problem in one of the prime symbols of the modern world - the supermarket. The supermarket has destroyed much which was once familiar - the grocer's shop, the local producer, the personal service - and instead has generated a different kind of variety, with goods from every part of the world, yet in some ways strangely uprooted and standardised. It is enormously convenient, yet it no longer belongs in any particular location. To the uninitiated it can be dizzying in its impact. I have already described how easy it is to become disorientated.

The loss of familiar landmarks is made all the more threatening by the new global perspective. Just as food now comes from every part of the world, dressed up in all sorts of enticing packages, so do ideas and beliefs. It is impossible nowadays to ignore the presence and power of other religions. If we are honest with ourselves we have to ask whether we really are the only ones who possess the truth. Have we nothing to learn, say, from Buddhists about the insight that we can only know ultimate reality by wordless meditation; or from Muslims about regular prayer and their rather terrifyingly direct certainties about heaven; or from Jews about surviving through suffering, and the centrality of family life? But this awareness of religious diversity is only part of a larger picture in which all claims to a comprehensive and exclusive understanding of reality are questioned. Can it really be the case that only one brand, as it were, is real food, and that all the rest are just empty packages, or at best food of inferior quality? 'Of course not', says the religious supermarket, 'there is quality everywhere.' Today's shoppers have to come to terms with the fact that there is no one way of thinking, no single story, which embraces everything in the world as we know it today. We seem to be offered an illusion of choice, for if we can only see the outside of the package before we choose, won't our choice be arbitrary, or at best ill-informed, more dependent on where we come from and the influences which have shaped our lives, on the packaging rather than on any careful assessment of the contents? The computer literate are also offered the illusion of power by clicking onto endless websites. But again all we really see is the packaging.

This sense of the arbitrariness of choice in the world's supermarket of ideas, is one of the acids which has eroded many people's convictions, and left them feeling angry, empty and disorientated, like the customers in M&S. What I have been describing very briefly is the phenomenon known as postmodernism. The name doesn't matter. It simply refers to what has followed the growing disillusionment with modernism. Modernism was the optimistic belief that enlightened human beings had arrived at a real understanding and mastery of our world, a scientific grip on life and all its ramifications, which could pave the way for continuous improvement. Today's world doesn't look quite so shiny and full of promise. Much of it is a confused mess, and out of control. And part of the mess is the bewildering variety of ideas about what is right, and what is really the case. Postmodernism, as I have described it, is not a philosophy which many people deliberately embrace. It is more of an atmosphere, a climate of opinion, in which people feel there are no certainties any more, that everything is relative, dependent more on who we are, and what we feel, than on any solid reality. It is the assumption that what we are pleased to call our philosophy of life is no more than an individual, and probably temporary, choice - on a par with choosing our friends, our clothes, and our food.

It is partly the rate of change which has brought about this feeling that our culture does not really know where it is going. There can be particular problems for young people, who are under pressure to respond to a thoroughly confused and pluralistic world, before they have had time to form their own identity. Life is full of rather pathetic attempts to gain attention or to assert one's individuality by doing something outrageous. Things are worse when parents are themselves uncertain about where they stand. In earlier times people grew up in a limited social environment, from which they could then venture out to explore other beliefs and ways of life. Today's children have only to turn on the TV, to be challenged by a kaleidoscope of images and ideas, and by values which may turn upside-down much of what they have been learning at home or in school. They are thrown into a confusing world of excitement, endless variety, self-indulgence and self-assertion, a hugely enticing world, so much so that it is hardly surprising if many of them end up not knowing really who they are. Without some underlying sense of order and stability, we have no criteria by which to judge between good and bad, sense and nonsense, right and wrong.

It is not only in the realm of faith and morals that there are problems caused by the rate of change. Scientific and technological change pose questions faster than we can answer them. Take GM crops. The breeding of new varieties is as old as agriculture. But it may take years, much trial and error, and many setbacks, to develop an improved variety of wheat, say. Traditional breeding methods are a step by step process, so that by the time a new variety becomes widely used, it is thoroughly adapted to its environment, and any problems with it are well known. By contrast substantial genetic modification can take place in a single leap. Despite careful testing the long term and wider implications of that single leap cannot be fully known in advance. That is why there are inherent risks, not because genetic modification is uniquely dangerous, but because it is uniquely fast. This is only one example among many of how rapid technological change, enormously beneficial though it may be, can generate unforeseen problems. And with the relentless competitive pressure for novelty in today's world, far from being masters of the future, we find ourselves less and less in control of it.

The same is true of cultural change. If we are to understand the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, for instance, and the terrorism which has grown out of it, there are strong indications that the pressures of rapid cultural change have had something to do with it. Western Christian civilization went through massive changes in the last few centuries, with the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the rise of science, the growth of democracy, the shaping of the modern world, and now the postmodern world of limitless choice. But these changes happened relatively slowly. People had time to adjust to them, and by and large their faith accommodated the changes. But in many parts of the world massive changes were imported almost overnight, whether through colonialism, or war, or the necessities of trade, or under the inspiration of modernising leaders who were embarrassed by the apparent backwardness of their own cultures. People had little time to adjust. Hence the violent reactions. And we find the same in some Christian communities which have tended to live in isolation from the mainstream culture. American fundamentalism is an obvious and very vocal example.

Can Newman help us to understand this? 'To live is to change.' But acceptable change has to grow out of what is already given, and as Newman saw it, this development of Christian doctrine takes a long time, and has to be controlled by constant reference back to the past.

Is there a secular equivalent to this? Let us go back for a moment to our supermarkets. We can see what they grew from. First the general store. Then the odd chain store, and now

vast conglomerations selling almost everything. Their growth might seem logical and inevitable. But what was required to make it work were new forms of management. Instead of individual shopkeepers making decisions about what they will sell, and at what prices, the whole business is now tightly controlled from the centre. This central management is so powerful that it can put huge pressures on producers as well as customers, it decides what choices can and cannot be made, and it adopts a style which effectively depersonalises the business of buying and selling. The basic values on which such a management depends are essentially impersonal - efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. These impose a kind of uniformity and rationality on what, in traditional markets, has been haphazard and personal. Choice, in other words, comes at a price. The advantages are obvious in the business of buying and selling, and the degree to which we are now dependent on supermarkets is a measure of the triumph of a new way of organising things in what is now a global market. But we have only to go back to some of the more traditional shops, where personal service still matters, to see what has been lost in the process.

Churches, as well as governments, have tried to learn from this way of doing things. But a creeping managerial culture spreading into more and more of our social institutions may not really be such good news as those who rule us might seem to think. The very fact that we can no longer rely, as we once could, on living in a society with shared beliefs, and values, means that greater emphasis has to be placed on explicit controls. Proliferating laws and regulations have become a measure of the absence of trust. Think again about efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, and apply that list to hospitals and schools and universities - and churches. Think of all those people avidly gathering statistics, demanding greater and greater accountability, and generating ever more petty-fogging rules. And if you want to be really depressed, think of those poor countries just joining the European Union, and having to master 97,000 pages of Community legislation, 23,000 of which were added last year, and all of which have to be translated into 11 different languages. It is all done in the name of fairness, efficiency, and predictability. But management-speak is now so deeply embedded in our culture that we fail to see how easily it can squeeze out the very things which make us human, and which can open us to God. The really valuable things in life are mostly inefficient, incalculable, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Love is perhaps the best example.

So what lessons can we draw from all this about Christian discipleship in our world of almost limitless choice? I suggest a kind of sceptical trustfulness. Sceptical, because there is much in our present culture to be sceptical about, and Christian faith at its heart has always contained a healthy streak of subversiveness. Our faith witnesses to a reality which cannot be contained or controlled within conventional ways of thinking and acting. God is the One beyond comprehension, the One to whom we can only point in wonder, love and praise. True saints stand out because they have broken the mould. Revelation entails the opening up of new dimensions, as in the experience of grace transforming individual lives. These are the seeds from which a true God-centred scepticism towards values of the world can begin to grow. Sadly the fact that Christians in Britain today are often derided for being tremendously conventional is a measure of our failure.

One possible starting point might, as I have already hinted, be a certain scepticism towards our managerial culture, now so heavily embedded even in church life. In a society where we are already under enormous pressures from consumerism, we have been allowing our churches to become trapped in the same way of thinking. Congregations are not yet

known as stakeholders, thank heavens, but in my own church I am alarmed by the degree to which working from the top downwards is replacing working from the bottom upwards.

I would like to think that I live in a sceptical, but trusting and caring, community. The scepticism is necessary. It can be a wake up call to look beyond the illusions of certainty towards a faith ready to take risks. As for trustfulness - that is not so much in evidence in the world at large. It is very hard to be a trusting individual in a society where trustfulness can no longer be relied on. But as Christians we can make a start.

How? By the normal exchanges which go on between friends, which are then widened to include those we don't know, those we disagree with, strangers from other cultures, and on and on in those networks of communication out of which trusting relationships are formed. Trust can sometimes be abused, which is why an element of scepticism is still needed. But the slow and careful building of trusting relationships, the knowledgeable concern about other people's lives, the open-mindedness willing to receive from other ways life, seems to me the most constructive way of coming to terms with our present individualistic and fragmented culture. There was a remark by Peter Ustinov quoted in his recent obituary, and although in one sense it is obvious, I was interested that it should be singled for special mention. 'I think knowing people is the best way of getting rid of prejudices.' This is also, it seems to me, a characteristically Christian thing to do. Isn't it what the incarnation was about being where people are?

Let me end with an example, a group of unfortunate people who have had a bad press, because their motives have been distrusted as they have tried to get their condition officially recognised. Transsexuals. When legislation about them was going through Parliament I received a huge mail, much of it from Christians, and all of it, I suspect, from people who had never actually met a transsexual. The consistent argument was that because God, or nature in the form of the X and Y chromosomes, had made humankind male or female, that was the end of it. Any supposed change would be flying in the face of reality. My correspondents had no doubt about it - not an ounce of scepticism. Transsexuals should not be recognised. But now listen to a specialist who actually works with such people.

I quote: 'Most practising doctors in the field would describe sex on six totally different definitions ... the genes on the Y chromosome are not the only genes that define sex. Although the Y chromosome is by far the most common and important, there are genes on chromosomes 17, 11, 10, 6, and 3 that can in exceptional circumstances determine sex of various kinds ... there is also hormonal sex. Some people will produce hormones that will tend to feminise them, while others will be masculinised ... ' and so on. Confused?

Those who make judgements about other people have to know them, or at least to know something about them. And this is no less true of the complicated lives and beliefs of those who are different from us, and whom we are learning to understand and to trust. All of which is relevant to today's conference and, I hope, may encourage us to make the most of it.