

THE VERY REVD DR JANE SHAW (b.1963)

I met Jane Shaw after an Ordination Service at Worcester Cathedral when she had been the preacher. She was, at the time, Dean of Divinity at New College, Oxford. Jane had studied herself at Oxford and then at Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley, returning to the West Coast of the U.S. in 2010 as Dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco where she is now.

So far Jane has not been a writer of great tomes. She writes for the Guardian and the Church Times. She has written on the Enlightenment, modern religious history and gender and sexuality and a biography of Octavia Bartrop, the amazing woman who created the Panacea Society in Bedford giving further life to the strange story of Joanna Southcott. Jane has edited books on culture and nonconformity and a thin one on the Call for Women Bishops.

So where do we get a feel of what she thinks? The best thing I have found so far is a slim volume based on a series of talks she gave in Texas, which was produced as a Lent Course in the United States and then marketed over here as "A Practical Christianity – working on transforming our lives".

This book is a healthy corrective to those books on believing and being a Christian which often present Christianity as a doctrinal religion. Jane says in her introduction that the earliest converts were not asked, "What do you believe?" but rather, "How has your life been transformed?" The questions put to sponsors of catechumens approaching Baptism in the third century were to do with their living good lives, honouring widows, visiting the sick and doing good works. So she argues practice came before belief to the pre-protestant earliest Christians who had been converted to faith because Christianity transformed their lives.

Early theologians grappled with questions to do with the nature of Jesus, and the Trinity and prayer was at the heart of their theology and so that for Jane is crucial as she theologises. A fourth century monk said, "A theologian is one who prays and one who prays is a theologian". She quotes Irenaeus from the second century on the consonance of the Eucharist and the teaching of the Church, and Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century who criticised Eunomias for ignoring Christian practices and relying solely on Christian ideas.

So as she gets into the swing of her thesis that Christianity is a practical religion, you won't be surprised that each chapter of the book has the practical questions you would expect from a good Lent Course.

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY has a straightforward approach:-

1. Look at yourself and your life. How do you prepare yourself to live sanely in a messy world?
2. Look at your relationship with God. Doubt is an important component as the relationship develops. Prayer and worship are central to it as well.
3. Look at your relationship with others, as you relate to your neighbour and the wider world.

As I have said, practical Christianity means not getting too bothered about beliefs and doctrines. They are not alien, or impossible to deal with. They do help to give a vision of what the world transformed would be like, but we can discover this vision also as we grapple with questions to do with our daily lives as we work it out within a Christian community. A Christian community is not "a body of like minded people compelled to believe and do exactly the same thing," but "a group of diverse women and men who care about transforming themselves and the world by love".

OURSELVES:

Looking at the resources we have to help us deal with daily life, Jane starts by reminding us that Jesus was a radical egalitarian. The records show how early Christians tackled issues to do with the differences between the sexes and the existence of slavery for example. Grappling with our individual and corporate faults can shake off some negativities as we pursue our journey. Confession and repentance, the first part of our regular act of worship are there to do just that. And we don't get far in delivering outcomes! "Wishing that all is well doesn't make anything well". Grappling and reconciling work has to be done. And some of the grappling results in our getting a heightened awareness of how we prevent life being lived Godly and freely.

Looking at our lives we have to discover what to wrestle with – and what to let go of, and how transformation can come in both of these situations if, with God's grace, we engage with the areas of life we find difficult.

Accepting the reality of our created nature can move us to an awareness of life in all its fullness.

We all have limitations of course, but by being accompanied by the love of God we have with us something greater than us that takes us beyond our defined limits. New life is possible.

Although we believe all this, that God loves us unconditionally, living it out is not easy. Contrary to our selfish instinct, we may have to stick with something that is vital to the Christian life by letting go our resentments and bitterness. "Sticking with it" can take us beyond what we thought was "the limit" of our depth of forgiveness.

She says:-

“Our capacity to forgive correlates to our experience of new life”.

So we can see why to forgive not seven times but seventy is a strong recommendation and an invitation to God to work through us!!

GOD:

Jane's chapters on relationship with God start with a discussion of certainty and doubt. You won't be surprised then that she is bothered about the certainty in the complete package presented in the doctrine of substitutionary atonement: a certainty that is re-enforced in each person by the unquestioning acceptance of the set of doctrines that is demanded of believers. Jane says at the end of that section:-

“That theology of certainty takes away the riskiness of God's incarnation, of God's entry into the world as a vulnerable baby, of God's sharing our suffering. It ducks the sheer abundance of God's love”.

She then goes on to give examples of what certainty has resulted in in Christian history - persecutions, wars and schisms. Recently, the current example of the Anglican Communion is a good example. But the big example has to be the Great Schism:

DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT PROCEED FROM GOD THE FATHER OR GOD
THE FATHER AND GOD THE SON?

Let's face it.....we don't know!

Jane, discussing “the thorny doctrine of atonement” says that how you see it in terms of practical Christianity will depend on whether you start with the sinfulness of mankind or the love of God. Opening ourselves to God and his unconditionality isn't very

“British”! We are encouraged - even if we didn't go to public school - to be self-reliant.

Our system of thinking works best if we have goodies and baddies, insiders and outsiders. We need outsiders so that we have examples of why sin continues to exist. The scapegoating of Jesus somehow gives permission to scapegoat minority groups. (Or perhaps the instinctive attractiveness to us of scapegoating encourages us to over-develop a theology with Jesus as scapegoat!!)

To start from the Love of God, the adventure of Christian living is very different. So Christ's death is not a sacrificial death to appease God's wrath but the end point of a life consciously lived in love and for love. She quotes Verna Dozier:-

“I always say Jesus did not get crucified for singing and praying – or even for doing good works. Jesus was crucified for challenging the powers that be, for offering human beings a new possibility for life. He didn't get into trouble for healing the sick, but for healing the sick on the Sabbath. He didn't get into trouble for being pious, but for challenging piety”.

Practical uncertainty is part of the mix, because life is an open ended adventure with God - a constant process of being transformed so that God's world might be transformed.

Jane then writes of experiencing God in glimpses, sensing beauty in the natural order and in created things and in simple regular spiritual exercises like saying the Lord's Prayer as you step in to the shower.

In disciplined and regular worship we glorify God and sense God's glory. As we worship, onlookers will perceive the existence and nature of the holy because of what we do.

Emphasising the mystery of God is related to the uncertainty that is essential for Faith, but we also need to tell the story of the Incarnation and the mystery of the Holy Spirit which works in our lives for transformation.

OTHERS:

When it comes to the Church and the World, we are sent out to put into practice what we have become – Christ's body on earth. The Church has a paradoxical approach to the World. On the one hand – God so loved the World that he sent his Son to improve peoples' lot. On the other hand, the actions of Jesus bring him into conflict with the World as he challenged human priorities and the institutions that had already decided how the world was to be run.

Of four models of Church and World –

1. The world is a very bad place so let's keep apart.
2. The world is a very bad place so let's try to convert as many people as possible
3. The world is a bad place, but in building the Kingdom Christians have to get their hands dirty.
4. The world is good and bad. Christ is already in the World.

Having been brought up with model 3, Jane says that she aspires to take on model 4. The Incarnation is a sign of God's overwhelming love for the World and there is goodness, wisdom

and experience in the world and we need to listen. She quotes William Temple, who said that all human experience was religious and could be interpreted religiously. So the logical development of all this thinking is that it is in the world where most Christians spend most of their time and that we are all called to serve and share the love of Christ.

She concludes her book looking at what loving our neighbour today might mean. Self knowledge includes acknowledging our vulnerabilities with other people – and with God. The building of the Kingdom of God means finding effective ways of working out what loving others means. For example, she makes a direct connection between Eucharistic celebration and food bank provision. It all starts,

“With our understanding of ourselves and the transformation God’s love can do to us. So in the World we know that that same love can transform the lives of the hungry, the stranger, the disliked, the untouchable.”

PETER MIDDLEMISS

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