

Bad Religion

D'you think there's such a thing as bad religion? It sounds like bad manners to say so, in our country. But indeed there is such a thing. Beliefs can lead to death not life, hate not love, violence not peacefulness. There are plenty of such beliefs abroad in the world, and *by their fruits you may know them*. This is a death-bound, hateful, violent world for many people. Knowingly or not, those responsible for this melancholy state of things have a religion which permits them to make it so, and we all bear some blame for letting it remain so. Which of us could claim that we could do no more to improve the world, than we have? Incidentally, the person who has no sins to confess has already blinded him- or herself to the distance between this world and the glory of God. I am always made sad when people say: *I have nothing to confess, nothing with which to reproach myself*. Behind the apparent contentment lurks a secret despair: *I can never be better than I am now*.

Good Religion

We shouldn't think of religion as a human list of possibilities, from which we choose like people in a "supermarket of beliefs". The second letter of Peter speaks of "opinions of destruction" – destructive choices, literally, whose adherents come to destruction themselves by being separated from Christ. What makes religion good, in apostolic eyes, is the degree to which it leads you to know Christ. Now, Christ is not to be reduced to human teaching or human opinions: *we do not choose him, he chooses us*. Nor must our inheritance of such a tradition as that of the Catholic Church ever rob us of our sense that he is greater than its greatest formulation of him. I think the greatest religious statements we make about Christ are the ones that preserve his mystery, his surpassing our knowledge, his transcendence. Our religion therefore is to begin and end in awe. The moment we have found a formula, which makes us think we have understood everything, is of the greatest danger to us. What we have totally understood is on the very brink of boring us. Idolaters always know the limitations of the gods they create. We must never try to set boundaries for the One who creates us.

Boundless religion

When we call our religion *catholic* we are already refusing to enclose it. We are proclaiming a religious call that is directed to all mankind, in its universal variety, a kind of communion that undercuts every division and contrast humanity has to show. Amongst the irreligious, these things become an excuse for rivalry, fear, hatred, conflict. Amongst us they must be the opening for compassion, self-giving, tolerance. God in Christ releases us from our factions, and recruits us to a communion whose sympathies are as wide as God himself, the Maker and Redeemer of all who live. If we are offended at the differences between human beings, we must take it up with God, who called all this variety into being.

Boundless God

We have the endless urge to define. In God there are no definitions, no limits. The human experiences which teach us to know him are therefore the ones that blow away our prejudices and the bounds of our own making. Learning new people and new views, new tastes and forms of beauty, growing up and changing our minds, the great gift of education. As one of our hymns says, we must be *changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place*; the great art is never to assume that the process is complete, that we have no further to go. That is the moment when we lose our hope for the glory of God, and become lost in an earthly dead end. That is what Jesus warns us about in today's Gospel: *do not work for food that cannot last*. His message is strictly for those who seek eternity. *Fr Philip*