

The Gospel in a Post-Modern Age

We often hear that we live in a “post-modern age”. But what does “post-modern” mean? And does it present a threat or an opportunity to our preaching of the Gospel?

Post-modernism is not so much a movement in itself as a reaction to the way of thought which has dominated the cultural scene for the last four centuries. Post-

Duck or rabbit? It's a matter of how you see it



modernism is a reaction to modernism, so we need first to understand what modernism is. Modernism can be seen as beginning with Isaac Newton. Although Newton himself was anything but a modernist – much of his work shows him as a man of his times who believed in alchemy and numerology – he made a key contribution in that he was able to explain the movement of the planets with a few simple and elegant equations. This gave rise to a view that truth could be discovered through rational thought, that

understanding would be progressive as one scientist built on the work of another, and that explanation could come through some single big idea that would enable everything else to fall into place around it. This way of thinking can be seen in science – such as Darwin’s theory of evolution; in economics – such as Adam Smith’s theory of capitalism; in political philosophy – such as Marx’s theory of historical materialism; and in many other spheres of thought. Modernism is by no means finished: thinkers such as Dawkins continue to see evolution as capable of explaining all aspects of social behaviour, and market capitalism is widely seen as providing an acceptable explanation of all things economic.

But in the second half of the last century, people began to sense problems with this way of thinking. The certainties promoted by modernism revealed a dark side: in politics as the evils of totalitarian ideologies became apparent; as disillusionment with the idea of Empire as a means of bringing benefits to less developed countries set in, and as scientific progress began to be seen as at best a mixed blessing with the development of weapons of total destruction and concerns about the environment and sustainability. Moreover science began to find that truth was not so simple: whereas Newton could be taught to schoolchildren, Einstein’s refinements, and what has followed Einstein, such as Chaos Theory, has placed scientific explanations beyond the comprehension of even well educated people. Now much of science has to be taken on trust.

The reaction to these problems with modernism meant that people began to reject the big ideas as no more than a means by which the powerful are able to exercise control, and especially in matters of politics and society people were no longer prepared to accept the certainties of their rulers without question. Post-

modernism thus arises from the idea that there is no single big idea which can explain everything, and even that there is no single truth in such matters that can be discovered.

Post-modernism thus emphasises the idea of perspective, that truth may depend on one's point of view; and plurality, that we have a degree of choice about what we think and what we do, and these choices can all be seen as valid. Some see this as a threat to religion: relativism seems to carry with it the idea that "anything goes", and this must be resisted. But there are things we use.

Certainty can be very harmful: when people think that because they are right all others are wrong, it quickly leads to exclusion, separation and even oppression. Remember that Jesus said I am the way, the truth and the life – we are called to believe in a person, not a fixed set of ideas and dogmas. This idea leads away from religion as a system, to a religion as a story, or more properly a set of stories, from the original narratives of the Gospel through the lives of Christians through the ages to the testimonies of Christian today. We learn of God's love and grace through the way it works in people's lives, and in the rich and diverse response that people have made to that love and grace.



This focus on story also brings with it the notion of community: one story is not enough to reveal the whole picture, and it is through our relations to others that we express our faith: the Kingdom of heaven is in the midst of us. We need to hear many stories, and not just stories of individuals but of believing communities living out the Gospel in their shared lives. The depiction of the Trinity in Orthodox icons as three persons joined in perfect understanding and love is a powerful image of what a believing community can aspire to be.

The ideas of post-modernism can help us to make a shift in perspective: away from dogma towards discipleship; from a rigid set of instructions to a set of principles we can respond to in the light of our own situation; from arguments we are supposed to understand to pictures and stories to which we can respond; from institutions which we join to living communities to which we belong.

There are some dangers in post-modern thinking - we do need to keep hold of the idea that what we believe is true, and there are limits to valid choice - but if it can help us to rediscover the need to find our own response to Jesus, and to recognise the importance of living out that response as part of an inclusive community