

Only One Way

John 14:1-14; Acts 4:8-12

18th Sunday after Pentecost

26th September 2010

Pope Benedict's state visit to Britain, which ended last weekend, seems to have been an unqualified success – according to most Roman Catholic sources. Even many non-religious commentators seem to have been wowed. Hardened, cynical journalists hailed him as a gentle pastor, a man of peace and commended him for all the apologies he has made on behalf of his church over the sexual abuse issue.

But this left me wondering: Is this really the same man who used to be Cardinal Ratzinger? Is this the same man who was the all powerful Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office at the Vatican? Was this the same man who was in charge of defending and reaffirming Catholic Doctrine as well as having jurisdiction over internal affairs such as clerical misconduct? Was this the same man who was once described by some of my Catholic friends as “God's Rottweiler” because of the fearless way in which he cracked down on liberals and dissidents within the church?

Before Benedict became Pope, I remember my Catholic nephew in London telling me the story of how three prominent and very controversial Roman Catholic churchmen all arrive at the Pearly Gates on the same day. Dr. Karl Rahner, Professor Hans Kung and Cardinal Ratzinger. St. Peter interviews them separately to assess their suitability for heaven.

Karl Rahner is first and, after 4 hours, the door opens, and Rahner comes stumbling out of St. Peter's office. He is highly distraught, and is mumbling things like “How could I have been so wrong! I'm so sorry...I never knew!” and stumbles off into heaven. Hans Kung is next, and when he finally appears after 8 hours in St. Peter's office, he is near collapse with weakness and a crushed spirit. He, too, is mumbling things like “How could I have been so wrong! I'm so sorry...I never knew!” and stumbles off into heaven. Lastly, Cardinal Ratzinger is called in to be interviewed for his place in heaven. 12 hours later it's St. Peter who stumbles out the door, exhausted and barely coherent, saying “How could I have been so wrong! I'm so sorry...I never knew!”

So which is the real Pope Benedict? Is he still Cardinal Ratzinger, the hard-line, doctrinaire enforcer of the Catholic faith, or has he morphed into the humble, self-effacing pastor of the flock? Has he changed from his pre-papal days? Has he had a Damascus Road conversion? Are we seeing, at last, in the gentler, kinder face that he is now presenting to the world, the real inner man coming through? It is so difficult to tell.

One aspect of the present Pope's thinking that is of concern – apart from women in ministry, the celibacy of

priests, views on AIDS and contraception, and inaction on matters of sexual abuse – is the way he still seems to harbour the age-old exclusivist attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards non-Roman Catholic denominations.

Before he became Pontiff, Cardinal Ratzinger, as head of the Vatican's *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, issued a document entitled *Dominus Iesus* in which he reaffirmed the ancient doctrine of *Extra Ecclesia Nulla Salus* or “outside the church [meaning the Roman Catholic Church] there is no salvation.” He says, “there exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. [But]the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery [and that means us as Presbyterians], are not Churches in the proper sense.”¹ Only the Roman Catholic Church has true access to the fullness of salvation. Other faiths, he said, are “in a gravely deficient situation in comparison”.²

The whole issue of Roman Catholic exclusivism is one that is of particular interest to us as heirs of the Reformation. As Presbyterians, we want to be treated as equals, to have our clergy, our sacraments, our ordinances, our very church accepted as being of identical validity and of corresponding status. The Second Vatican Council of the 1960s gave us real hope of progress in this direction but since then there seems to be an increasing retreat to the old exclusive ways. One hopes that the future might see the election of more liberal and enlightened cardinals and popes that will herald the advent of a new era. And, of course, many Roman Catholics pray ardently for this too.

As I said, the whole issue of exclusivism between Roman and non-Roman denominations is one that is of special interest within the church. But, if the truth be told, not much further. However, there is a quite separate and broader issue of exclusivism that is of great interest both inside and outside the church, and is very current in contemporary dialogue about Christianity itself. Many ask what right Christians have to make exclusive claims about their faith. What right do they have to claim that Jesus Christ is, in the words recorded in John's Gospel, “the Way, the Truth and the Life”? What right do they have to claim that no-one can gain access to God, the Father, except through this Galilean preacher?³

Conservative evangelical preachers do not, of course, have any problems in this area. If the Bible says that Jesus is the only way to God then, for them, that's that. No questions asked. But there is a trend among

more liberal thinkers to question this statement. Spurred by New Age thinking, they promote pluralistic thinking or a “common denominator” approach which holds that all religions are equally viable pathways to God. They believe, like the Romans of Paul’s day, that all religions are equally true, equally false and equally useful.⁴ Bishop John Spong, for instance, believes that the God-presence in Jesus can equally be found in other great holy people whether Buddha, Mohammed, Krishna, Mahatma Gandhi or the Dalai Lama.⁵

All this has, unfortunately, made many of us Christians very uncomfortable with the exclusive claims of our faith. We tend to be confused when we hear the biblical words “Jesus said: ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.’”⁶ We don’t want to appear intolerant in today’s pluralistic, inclusive society yet we do want to believe that in some way our faith is unique. How, therefore, can we interpret these words for our faith-experience in today’s world?

Let’s remember, of course, that these words of Jesus do not refer to any church. No denomination can claim them and say they themselves are the Way, the Truth and the Life. After all, we are not saved by any earthly church or by any philosophy or theology or doctrine or force or principle. We are only saved by a person. By Jesus Christ. He alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And these attributes are not transferable.

Then, again, let’s not feel under pressure to assent to the politically correct belief that all religions are equally acceptable paths to God lest we be deemed intolerant. After all, in the secular world don’t companies and organisations make exclusive claims about themselves and their products all the time without fear of being branded as bigots. Would the Coca-Cola company, for instance, say that all soft drinks are equal? That Pepsi is as good as Coke? No way! And what about McDonalds, would they say “Go to Burger King or Wendy’s and you’ll get just as good a hamburger”? Of course, not. They would claim with pride that their product is unique, exclusive and the best on the market.

So, why would we as Christians timidly say that other religions, other truths, other faiths and other ways to God are just as good as the way offered by Jesus? No, our personal experience has told us otherwise. So we should not be afraid to stand up and make this bold claim again and again on behalf of our Master. And we should do it fearlessly in the spirit of the old Presbyterian paraphrase which says, “I’m not ashamed to own my Lord or to defend his cause.”⁷ After all, if we don’t believe that Jesus Christ is unique, special, different, distinctive, matchless, then why would we believe in him? Why would we follow him? What would be the point? He would have nothing worthwhile to offer us.

Yes, let’s witness boldly in today’s world to the uniqueness of Christ and what he has to offer. But, though we do it boldly and fearlessly, let’s not do it in an

overbearing spirit of superiority or contemptuousness or contentiousness but always with love and sensitivity. Let’s do it simply, humbly and respectfully out of a belief that God has given us a gift of great value which we genuinely and sincerely wish to share with other people. As our Presbyterian statement of belief *Living Faith* says, “We should not address others in a spirit of arrogance, implying that we are better than they. But rather, in the spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found, we point to ... Christ, as the Way the Truth and the Life.”⁸

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¹ Brackets are mine.

² “If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.” (Congregation For The Doctrine Of The Faith: Declaration “Dominus Iesus” on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, August 6, 2000)

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

³ John 14:6

⁴ “The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord.” Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, p. 29

⁵ John Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*, HarperCollins, 2002, p.145

⁶ John 14:6

⁷ Hymn 393 *The Book of Praise*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997, Isaac Watts from Scottish Paraphrases

⁸ *Living Faith*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Woodlake Books, 1984, pp. 26,27