

## Reflection

Many of us will have witnessed a small Sunday School child enthusiastically responding to questions from the front of church, and always giving the answer 'Jesus', because the child thinks that's the answer the adults always want to hear. Unfortunately, sometimes even adult Christians get caught in the trap of giving the answer they think their own particular group wants to hear, even in matters where there should be real debate or inquiry, such as politics or science.. People can live in a bubble of 'group-think' which they take as absolute orthodoxy, and which defines their membership and acceptability to others in the group, leading to real hostility when someone steps out of line. It has happened in all sorts of groups and sub-cultures of the church, so if I take as an example now American evangelicalism now, please don't think I'm making a generalised criticism of either evangelicals, or Americans – or even, of all American evangelicals!

However, if we follow the news, we can't fail to be aware that the United States is a real 'culture war' going on, in which religious groups have a large part. And one of the phenomena of this culture war is that many young evangelicals, brought up in very tight bubbles of thinking - people who may have been home-schooled by pious parents, and then college educated in doctrinally narrow institutions – are rebelling against those sectors of evangelicalism which have made social and political conservatism an article of faith. Many of them are saying things like this:

*'Up until a few weeks ago, I considered myself an evangelical Christian',* and going on to explain that something has profoundly changed for them. They are no longer willing to be part of a thought world which they see as oppressive to women or unconcerned about the damage to God's creation, opposed to justice and civil rights issues, or defiantly ignoring Covid-19 health protection measures, such as face-masks, just to prove their 'faith'.

Some of those who are defecting from this bubble, like a young woman called DL Mayfield whom I quoted above, have made a stand, not only against political views they oppose, but explicitly against the leadership and culture of their churches. They have felt the ire of the group they formerly identified with turned upon themselves. Mayfield, having joined the Black Lives Matter protests along with other members of her prayer group, then also protested against a large gathering of Christians which she felt was opportunistically being held by vocal Trump supporters, supposedly to promote 'riots to revival'. She wrote of the experience of making her protest:

*'Just standing on the edge of the worshipping crowd was enough to draw the ire and attention of many folks. For almost two hours I was constantly confronted, yelled at, livestreamed, prayed over and told I was not a real Christian (for the record, I was simply holding a sign that had a Bible verse on it - Amos 5.23-24:*

*'Away with your noisy hymns of praise*

*I will not listen to the music of your harps.*

*Instead I want to see a flood of justice,  
an endless river of righteous living.'*)

*I was not prepared for how much worse this would be than tear gas.'*

This is why she said she no longer identifies as an evangelical, although she most definitely is still a Christian, and writes about how difficult that transition has been.

Why have I referred to all this here? Was it as a kind of evangelical-bashing from the pulpit? *Certainly not*, as I hope I made clear above. In every branch of the church there are those who live in a world of their own, who ally their faith to political ideologies, and who are deeply intolerant of defectors from their midst. You can find poisonous attitudes and denunciations on some Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and theologically Liberal websites. And when it comes to evangelicalism, we know that the American evangelical

scene is large enough to be varied, and anyway, is very different from the one in Britain which is, happily, not entrenched in such profound culture wars with all who disagree.

I did so because I was reading her article just before I turned to the texts for this Sunday, and it struck me forcefully how much Mayfield's experience mirrored that of St Paul. He, too, came out of a tight little world – the world of first century Jewry in the midst of the Roman empire - and felt that he lost all his background in making the move. Within the Jewish community he had every reason to feel confident, to be sure of his identity, and to feel that he was admired for the way he lived it out : *'If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.'* Yet he goes on,

*'Whatever gains I had I regard as loss because of Christ. ... I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.'* (Philippians 4. 4- 8).

Like D.L. Mayfield, a home-educated pastor's daughter, who knows her Bible very well, he 'fitted the bill' excellently for his cultural bubble – but he found himself compelled to step out of it. And, like her, he met huge hostility from those he was leaving behind. For Paul, it was his conversion by Christ on the Damascus Road that brought this about. For Mayfield, it was a forceful perception that those who had previously been 'her people' had not grasped the meaning of their own faith, particularly the Bible's message about justice. In a way you could say that this is similar to what Paul would have said of his own people - they had radically failed to recognize the true meaning their Scriptures were pointing them to. It's incredibly painful when a rift like this is revealed. It was painful in Paul's life, it's painful in Mayfield's.

What does this say to us? That we should above all things beware of living in a tight cultural bubble, tolerating only those who agree with

us? That we should choose rather to be relaxed and at ease if our children and grandchildren move away from the faith we brought them up in, and the church which has sustained us? That we should simply live and let live?

No – not quite. Because, like Paul, Mayfield hasn't 'drifted away' from her former faith and way of life. Instead, she has allowed God to deepen it, to transform it, to take it through a process of repentance and turning round, because she *cares*. She cares deeply about finding the true roots and meaning of the things she was taught. And that's how Paul felt about Judaism – he cared about its true roots and meaning, and he was prepared to stake his life on *metanoia*, a converted 'turned-around' view of it. And he was also prepared to suffer 'the loss of all things' for this transformed faith, and of course, also to be vigorous in sharing it.

So, we're not in the territory here of the easy so-called 'tolerance' which treats faith and how it is lived out as a rather indifferent matter. We're in a realm here where we know that Christians should be passionate about their faith, whilst always remaining open to change if God opens up his message to us in a new and deeper way. A realm where we believe that transformation to truer discipleship is possible, and that it's what we should be praying for in our own lives and in the lives of those we care for, even though it may be painful. But above all, we're in a realm where love and justice are the true measures of our relationship with God, and with the rest of the world.