Advent 4 Year B 2011 (read only)

Living in Britain, we are rather wary of radical forms of faith. Yet it is important to distinguish between radical forms of faith that emerge from viewpoints that judge others and issue in violence and condemnation and radical faith that comes from a compassionate view of the world and issues in service.

Our world is plagued by the wrong kind of all or nothing way of believing. This wrong kind of all or nothing believing produces radical believers who take it upon themselves to make others conform to their view of the world or their image of God; anyone who stands in their way is in their eyes a valid target for abuse or even elimination. So we have people who will commit heinous crimes and justify them by claiming they are doing God’s work.

Quite rightly, we dismiss radicals of this kind and we can become wary, even scornful of any form of enthusiastic or radical living. As a consequence our own faith lives can stagnate or even wither if we decline to respond to the promptings that come our way. Such unheeded promptings occur when we hear a passage of scripture, observe the good example of others or behold the wonder of the universe without responding in the way we conduct our own lives.

David Cameron gave us an example of this only yesterday. He described himself as committed but only vaguely practicing Christian. Such a candid description is rather admirable and it is refreshing to hear a prime minister acknowledge his own doubts; indeed who could blame any parent for struggling in faith when their own child suffers as his did.

Such honest questioning is always preferable to the intransigent violence of extremism. It may well be the best that some of us can have.

Yet the story of human faith also provides us with examples of those who respond radically to God in their personal lives. One who has inspired me is the French monk Charles de Foucauld who I have spoken of before.

Charles came to mind again as I pondered today’s familiar gospel story of the Annunciation, he sprung to mind for three reasons: first because he spent a number of years as gardener at a convent in Nazareth, and I made a point of visiting this convent during my sabbatical. Secondly, he composed what is now known as the Prayer of Abandonment. This is a prayer that might easily be associated with Mary’s radical response to Gabriel’s message.

The third reason why Charles de Foucauld came to mind is that he embraced faith wholeheartedly in his late 20’s having abandoned it as a young man. What brought him to this point began with the example of good and pious Muslims he observed when conducting a project in Morocco. Despite his own lack of faith he began to pray: “My God, if you exist, let me come to know you.” On his return to France he was for the first time struck by the living faith of his own relatives. In time he embraced the Christian faith with the same determination that had marked his earlier career. To use his own words: “As soon as I believed in God, I understood that I could not do otherwise than to live for him alone.”

Like Mary, who had lived in Nazareth two millennia before him, Charles had an encounter with God’s invitation that transformed his life. And so it was that he embraced a radical life of prayer and poverty which eventually took him back to the desert of Algeria where he lived a mostly solitary life among the Tuareg nomadic tribes. His only desire was to “shout the Gospel with his life”. And his ambition was to be sufficiently good that people would say, “If such is the servant, what must the Master be like?”

So, did he achieve his ambition? Not according to some points of view, for on the evening of December 1st 1916, he was killed by a band of marauders who had encircled his house. To some he was a drop out; he had abandoned a prosperous inheritance and may well have had a successful career. To some eyes his death in such a remote location and at such a young age is a sign of failure. But like so many touched by God’s grace, his example continues to inspire many others to embrace a life of simplicity and prayer. Radical, wholehearted and in peaceful respect of those who did not share his own convictions.

Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.