

Easter 4 Year A  
Leicester Cathedral

In a recent survey commissioned by Theos, a religion think tank, well over half those questioned said they believed Jesus rose from the dead. The report added a splendidly, if theologically complex note, that included 12% of people who said they were atheists.

For many people, vague faith still means vague Christianity. And for the last few decades it has been assumed that vague faith would become no faith.

But that assumption was premature. Religion has become increasingly significant internationally, and also here at home. Over Easter Bishops, both Roman Catholics and Anglican, featured in the headlines with their condemnation of a clause in the current Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill which will allow for the creation of cytoplasmic hybrid (cybrid) embryos, produced by inserting a nucleus from a human cell into an animal egg. The resulting cybrid would undergo development for 4 to 5 days, until the inner cell mass rises, from which stem cells will be harvested. Stem cells allow for the study of the early stages of disease process, especially of those neurological diseases which are incurable, debilitating, and terminal. Diseases like Motor Neurone disease, with which Canon Christine Smeaton lived painfully with for 2 years, and recently died.

The proposal to allow for research in this area has stimulated significant debate, and bishops lobbied the Prime Minister in stark, sometimes dramatic language, to allow a free, rather than a whipped vote on the grounds that this was a profound issue of conscience.

Archbishop Roman was more restrained and subtle, saying

"The hybrid question - there has been a lot of rather extreme and alarmist talk about this and I fully accept that it is not about the breeding of monsters, but at the same time, I think there remains this very instrumentalist view of the human embryo: we use it for something and then destroy it, and I find that ethically very hard to accept.

"The hybrid embryos is just an aspect of overall attitudes to embryo research.

"In this country, more than in many others we seem to be taking for granted that it is all right to regard the human embryo as something to be used instrumentally - that is my big moral concern."

A sermon doesn't allow space for detailed consideration of the many significant issues. But the readings for today do offer a framework for beginning that thinking.

John's gospel offered the image of the sheepfold, the place of refuge for the sheep, enclosing walls with a single entrance, guarded by the shepherd. It is a powerful visual image of Christ as protector and saviour of his flock.

Many of the Bishops who pronounced most strongly against the Embryology Bill, including the Anglican Bishops of Durham and Lichfield, seemed to be operating with a view of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians as being in need of the shelter of the sheepfold, held as a flock together, distinct and separate and in need of protection from the hostile world of politicians and scientists. They spoke, it seems to me, out of a particular view of creation, as being entirely God's prerogative, of the embryo, as human being from fertilisation, of moral science as needing to focus on means rather more than ends, of the need to exert political muscle, not just influence over legislation (with the possibility of opt-outs). Theirs was a view of the church set over and against the state.

But other gospels use other images of the sheep and the shepherd: Matthew writes of Jesus sending his disciples out as sheep among wolves. And Luke's depiction of the earliest followers of Jesus is much more confident out in the temple, attracting many by their worship, prayer and generous hospitality. Here was no huddled, fearful flock, but a fluid, open community whom the risen Christ had called and empowered.

The Bishops who have responded to the debate seem to fit within that tradition. The Bishop of Portsmouth wrote of his own fight with Leukaemia, and how stem cell research has enabled transplant treatments to be developed. There is a tradition which sees humans as participating with God in an ongoing process of creation,

which sees the embryo as a potential human being, rather than a human being with potential, which seeks to work with scientists on the ethical issues surrounding scientific development, and which sees the ends of that research being profoundly important. So the Bishop of Lincoln wrote. 'When it is actual human beings in potentially terminal distress who can benefit from such stringently regulated research as is authorised by this Bill, then we may need to take a more measured view than recent reporting on Episcopal opinion suggests is the case'<sup>1</sup>. This perspective sees the Church operating from well within the state.

And there are obvious concerns with this approach, concerns about the slippery slope, whether in science, or in our legislative framework, where incrementally, decision after decision leads to...a morally abhorrent result. Or at least a desensitisation of the moral perspective. It is arguable that this has happened in the legislation allowing abortion. It is the fear that some have about the developing legislative framework around end of life issues.

In other words there is a real fear that Christians within these debates will cease to be salt and light. And we need to attend to that fear.

Going back to the image of the first disciples in the temple, it was clear that these followers of Jesus had a strong sense of calling, and identity, a confidence in their faith and its implications. They could debate on equal terms with the religious leaders and the crowds around them, as Peter and Stephen proceeded to do. They had a strong sense of having a new perspective which they offered joyfully within the familiarity of the temple.

It was the sort of sense that I heard in the words of Prof Mary Seller who works in developmental genetics at King's College London and is an assistant priest in the diocese of Guildford

'As a scientist who is also a Christian, I find what I learn from this (stem cell) research illuminates my knowledge of God, for it allows me to observe the wonders of God's

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<sup>1</sup> The Church Times, 4 April 2008

creation which are not overt. Hitherto, the complexities of gene action have been secrets known only to God, but now we know. I can only marvel at the splendour, the majesty of it all, in awe, I just have to praise God. It impels me to discover more<sup>2</sup>.

But it takes a major row to get Mary Sellers' words into print. British culture is one in which there is a reluctance to discuss issues of scientific morality. One of my colleagues at Cambridge 20 years ago was emerging on stem cell research with a colleague in Sweden. In Sweden they stimulated a public debate on what they did, and why they did it. In England they found that impossible. Over recent years, scientists have been reluctant to persevere with the debate. And the public has been reluctant to work at scientific issues. Which leaves politicians exposed to pressure from those who speak in stark, even extreme religious language.

In the coming years Christians must, I believe, exercise their brains rather more effectively, learn to relate to the issues of the day rather more profoundly. Perhaps part of our emerging vision for the St Nicholas Building can be to offer a place of encounter where the great moral issues can be explored with each other, with experts locally and nationally, with the media. The walls of the sheepfold do need to come down, but, to mix metaphors, the roots of our faith also need to be much much deeper down also if we are to witness to resurrection life in all its abundance

Vivienne Faull

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<sup>2</sup> The Tablet, 5 April 2008