

Hear O Israel

Driving into London this morning, listening the the Hymn Holy Holy Holy, being sung on the radio 4 Sunday morning service, I found that I was stuck in traffic behind a car which contained the devil and all his angels. The devil was driving a Nissan Micra, and both he and his female passengers were wearing horns and various other demon-outfits. Still, I couldn't help noticing that he stuck to the speed limits, obeyed the traffic lights and even flashed another vehicle to join the road in front of him. Either there was a question as to whether all authority has been granted to him, or perhaps last night was Halloween.

We are so used to Halloween bashing in the church, that I wonder whether we really understand what it is. Of course, there is something horrible about going into supermarkets and seeing stupid costumes and toys and skeletons and wizards. Or so we are told. Christians often regard the denunciation of Halloween as a test of biblical soundness, Christian boldness or spiritual insight. And why should we stop to think about this when there is an evangelical bandwagon waiting to be boarded?

But there is a major problem with this sound Christian belief in the evil of Halloween, and that is, that Halloween is fundamentally a Christian celebration. It is the evening (e'en) prior to All Saints ('All Hallows') Day. Just as on Christmas Eve, Christians prepare for the day on which they celebrate the birth of Christ – so on the eve of All Saints' Day, they would be reminded of the Saints of Christ who have died in the faith. A time to be reminded about our own walk with Christ, our own future with Christ, and in the meantime our utter mortality.

However, in the modern era, our human mortality became rather embarrassing. With faith in human progress, belief in scientific advance and the assumption that 'Man is the measure of all things', such a blatant reminder about our human frailty seemed dated. The Christian celebration of Halloween fell into a state of disrepair.

Tracing the history behind Halloween does indeed lead us to ancient pagan fertility worship associated with the final harvest of the year. The history of how Christian worship transformed this pagan festival into Halloween is a long and complex one. But if we are appalled that the roots of the Christian Halloween lie in pagan worship rites, then we ought to be equally offended at the Christian celebration of Easter and Christmas. The pre-Christian history of both these festivals is thoroughly pagan, but we are happy to ignore this. Perhaps witches and pumpkins are easier to condemn than Easter eggs and Christmas presents.

I suspect that God is a lot less troubled by the skeletons, ghosts and ghouls than by the white-bearded, pot-bellied, red-coat: the idol of shameless greed, family-worship and western selfishness that we affectionately call 'Father Christmas'. I'm not suggesting we cancel Christmas - not only because my kids would promptly visit upon me a swift reminder of my own mortality – but because through all the tinsel-wrapped, alcohol-soaked, 'biblically justified' consumerism that Christmas has become, there is still something important to be celebrated.

But the same might also be true of Halloween. In an age where our mortality is desperately begging for scientific progress to overcome it, that is, an age where we struggle to take death seriously, the Christian celebration of Halloween might offer an opportunity for counter-cultural witness. In an age where J.K. Rowling receives complaints about the death of a child in her *Harry Potter* books, where our children - so it seems – need to be protected from

knowing about the harsh realities of death, might not Christians have something to say? Without taking death seriously, we cannot take resurrection seriously. Without taking resurrection seriously the Christian faith loses any substance. But taking death and resurrection seriously are almost impossible.

Hear O Israel:

We have heard, in two settings this morning, the golden rules for Christian living – the Shema, and the Empathetic Principles – Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself. A vertical axis and a horizontal axis for Christian ethical living. But the command about loving God, is called the Shema by the Jews. And I wonder if you know why? Because Shema is from a Hebrew word for listening. The command to love God is prefaced by a command which Christians are great at not hearing: it is the command to hear! Shamar – Hear O Israel.

This is not just the preface to a random command because until that moment the Israelites were playing Scrabble – so Moses has to shout up for everyone to listen! This command is not just the military command to listen up before orders are instructed. This single word command, is a command that tells you how to obey the commands that will follow! It is the command to hear –

To hear the command of God is not just to think – oh, okay, that is God's command. Nor is it to think – Oh, okay, I understand the command of God, or O Okay, I know what the command of God is now. Because actually, there isn't much to hear there anyway. And once you have learned this command, this single sentence, you know it – so you don't have to keep hearing it. Once you have heard it once, you get it. It is simple and straightforward. But how many times have Israel, and how many times has the church fallen into this trap?

No wonder the basic command for the people of God is this: Hear, O, Israel! But hearing is not an easy thing to do. If we hear properly, it hurts! If we hear properly, it threatens who we are and what we value and how we live! If we hear properly, a question mark can be thrown over our life's achievements to this point. But the command is Hear O Israel. But if we hear properly, then we may lose respect in some people's eyes, we may have to accept that we have been wrong – either about an opinion we hold, or about a lifestyle we have treasured. But the command remains: hear O Israel.

We need to protect ourselves from this command. We have defence mechanism that excuse us from obedience, from real listening: We have done an Alpha course, so now we know what the Christian faith is, and we don't need to listen any more. We have been a Christian for a long time, and we know what the Christian faith is, so we don't have to listen any more. We have thought about this or that before, so we don't have to listen to a sermon on it any more. There is a perpetual and sinister obnoxiousness to which Christians and others are subject, which dresses itself in humility, politeness, pseudo –wisdom and fake spirituality: this obnoxiousness which tells us that we already know, and we don't need to listen any more. I already know what you are going to say, so I don't need to listen any more. I already know what you think, so I don't need to listen properly to you any more!

There is something deeply mortifying about proper listening. It involves the risk of a little death and a little resurrection. It involves sacrifice. And this was something Halloween was meant to celebrate I think. That on All Hallows Eve, we prepare for all saints day. We

remember the holiness of the saints – saints who are now dead, who are now in the hands of God. And we are reminded – as almost all great Christian thinkers have reminded us – of our own mortality, the fact that our lives belong to God. To live this mortal life here, and now to the glory of God. Because this mortal life is a gift from God!

But no – we don't want talk of human mortality, of human death, of human weakness, of human limits. And in such a climate, churches follow suit – and instead of having a Halloween Party, will have a Pirate Party! Happened in my village a couple of years ago – and you might just imagine God, seeing this, tearing his hair out and saying “hear O Israel”.

Sermons:

But our inability to hear the commands of God, is not only restricted in such obviously, unreflective ways. In more sophisticated, lively, upbeat, cutting edge versions of Christianity – the inability to listen is blatant! So, in all sorts of circles, the idea of a sermon is now seen as obsolete. We don't need to listen any more – because why should someone bleating from a pulpit know any more than I do? My opinion's just as valid, and has every bit as much a right to be heard! Sermon's are now an outdated form of communication, because the human race has moved on! Well – obviously, I have a vested interest here, so don't speak with a huge amount of objectivity.

Except to say this. That listening is not, as the emerging church ‘thinkers’ seem to assume, listening is not a passive activity. Preaching is an activity of the whole church. Listening is something active, not passive. I'm delighted to be in a church where the congregation do not have to agree with the preacher in order to feel that they have engaged with God's Word. A sermon is not some moralising instructions from one person that knows better than everyone else. It is a mutual exploration of God's Word – and the preacher is someone who has been immersed in the academic activity both of years of exploring the world of scripture (After all, we are called to love God with all our mind), and the prophetic work of understanding where the congregation is today. Those who believe that the congregation is doing nothing while the sermon is being preached, are, by definition, those who do not believe in listening! “Here O Israel”

And I wonder whether, in Israel today, the same is true. Hilary Clinton, having gone off to listen to both sides, is told that no one is changing, no agreement will be reached, no solutions won! But she said, and rightly so, that keeping the conversation alive is important in itself. Listening has invisible, undefineable, unmeasurable consequences that are off the radar of our efficient, effective, productive, pragmatically-obsessed individualism. Listening is not nothing. It is powerful, and it hurts, and it lies at the core of what it means to be the people of God!

All too often, whether in a traditionalist setting or in a lively cutting edge setting, we are great at disguising our refusal to Hear as wisdom. And in the end, whilst we think we were being Holy Holy Holy, we are actually following the route of the devil and all his angels!

We are called to listen to God, and there is nothing passive about that. We are called to receive bread and wine, and there is nothing passive about that. We are called to be God's people:

Hear, O Israel...