

Whitewashing the Faith

Readings: Ezekiel chapter 13, verses 8 -16; Matthew chapter 23, verses 23 – 28

Way back in 597 BC a Babylonian army besieged Jerusalem. They entered the city; rounded up the leaders and the intelligentsia and carried them off to Exile in Babylon. Ezekiel was one of the exiles. He kept in contact with those who had been left behind in Jerusalem and they were in denial. They refused to accept that Jerusalem would ever be completely destroyed. And they were backed up by any number of prophets who assured them that this was the City of God and God would never allow its destruction.

Ezekiel despised these false prophets who spoke only what the people wanted to hear. He said that they were like men building a wall knowing full well that the materials they were working with were sub-standard. And that their own workmanship was shoddy. We have a name for such people today. We call them 'jerry builders'. To cover up their shoddy workmanship they daubed huge amounts of whitewash so as to give the appearance of strength and stability. Things haven't changed much since then. The whitewashing process goes on today.

Politicians all over the world are past-masters at whitewashing. They cover-up dubious policies and failed practices with fine words; but its all an exercise in whitewashing. Preachers sometimes do the same. We say what we think people want us to say and cover up with carefully selected texts so that people are bamboozled into thinking it is the word of God. But its simply whitewashing.

Ezekiel was right — 11 years later he was proved right. The Babylonians attacked a second time; they destroyed Jerusalem and razed the Temple to the ground. The city was left a ruin.

What concerns me today is the way in which we whitewash our Faith and I isolate two ways of doing it.

1. One is that we give it a cultural whitewash.

You only have to live in a 3rd World country to see this. When the Methodist Church was established in Zimbabwe they formed the equivalent of the Womens Fellowship. It had its rules and regulations and one rule was "Don't let your children run around naked". In the minds of African women this soon translated as a sign of being a Christian and from there to it being a condition of Church membership. But that "rule" was simply a Western cultural accretion and it had precious little to do with what being a Christian really means.

I can think of an example nearer home. We are coming up to Christmas and if ever there was a Christian festival overlaid by cultural accretion it is Christmas. It has become an orgy of over-spending; over-eating and over-drinking. Christmas is not Christmas unless we have a tree (even if it's a plastic one) festooned with coloured lights and an angel perched precariously on the top. Not to forget the mistletoe which has its uses! Meanwhile the radio and TV regale us with Christmas "music" which is often a recording of Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. But all this is mere whitewash. It covers up the real meaning of Christmas which is the staggering Truth that, in Christ, God has become one with us and one of us.

I am not suggesting that we should, or even could, get rid of the cultural expression of our Faith. But I am arguing that we should beware of using culture as a kind of whitewash to cover-up an inadequate and faulty understanding of our Faith.

2. Another way of whitewashing the Faith is to be found in the shallow and superficial thinking.

I can never forget one lady who was a pillar of the Church in my first circuit. She played the organ, attended every Bible study and prayer meetings, and could quote "texts" at the drop of a hat. Superficially she knew it all. But then her husband died of cancer. Overnight her faith collapsed. She became bitter and cynical and refused to darken the doors of the Church. Why? Because her faith was both simplistic and superficial. She had never thought through the texts she so constantly quoted. And the first time that real life posed a question mark against her simplistic belief it collapsed like a lead balloon.

There is a real sense in which the Christian Faith is simple. But it is not simplistic. There is a difference. And simply to be able to quote texts at random is often no more than a mere whitewashing of our Faith. And, when the enemy is at our gates (as Ezekiel discovered) the whitewashed walls are easily breached and offer no defence.

Ezekiel was right. And I would argue that character is like a fence. It cannot be strengthened by whitewash. So I ask you to look again at the structure of your faith. And to enquire whether what you see is the external appearance of stability daubed with whitewash. Or is it something more substantial? The solid bedrock of our Faith is a commitment to God through Christ. And that commitment reaches down into the depths of our being. It involves heart and mind and soul and strength and will.

Anything less is mere whitewash