

CONCORD

MARCH 2006.

Prayer for the Month, and for Lent:

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have won for us and for all the pains and insults you have borne for us; Most merciful redeemer, our friend and brother, help us to see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly day by day.

Give us the grace and strength to serve you without counting the cost, to fight for you and not to be troubled by the wounds, and to labour and not to seek for any reward except that we know we are doing your will.

For your honour and glory's sake. Amen.

Dear Friends, It's Only Lent !

March 1st is actually the beginning of Lent ~ Ash Wednesday ~ so a brief question: .not *what are you giving up for Lent?* but *what are you taking up for Lent?* I know discipline is not a trendy, or cool thing (or whatever is the trendy or cool word for trendy or cool nowadays) in any walk of life, let alone spirituality. All the same, to put some shape into our relationship with God and to give that relationship some content is both important and beneficial.

So it should not just be a matter of giving up sweets and chocolates or whatever, but taking up reading the bible more often, or attending church worship more often, or taking on something which will help the community, or a charity, or the neighbours ~ and of course, it does not need to stop after Easter Saturday!

Read a Psalm a day (but don't start with no. 119!) Better still read a page from one of the Gospels; let what you read work in your mind. It may tell you more about God, or the way he shows his love for us through Jesus. It may give us an example to

follow, or an error to avoid; it may simply contain a verse which speaks direct to you, encouraging or checking; it may give words to an emotion, even an unwelcome emotion, and help you work through it.

Use what you read to allow God to speak to you, or you to speak to God. Happy Lent!

*Yours faithfully, **Greg Forster***

PROVE IT!

In January there was an article in the Newspapers about some latter day Don Camillo, the parish priest in a town in Italy who is being challenged in the courts by a local lawyer ~ let's call him Peppone ~ to prove the existence of Jesus. Peppone the atheist reckons that his Don Camillo is guilty, in Italian law, of deception. The court set a deadline of Jan. 31st for the evidence to be produced, though I have not seen any reports of how the case is proceeding. (That's Italian courts for you, perhaps ~ or is it Newspapers?)

The priest's initial reaction, as reported, was to say "I don't need to prove that the sun rises every day," which is fair comment, but does not actually answer the specific challenge. So how would you answer this accusation?

I will give you some ideas to start you off. Firstly, as it seems, Peppone has not asked for proof that God exists, or even that Jesus is God incarnate. He has not even asked for proof that Jesus walked on water, or performed any other miracles. That is a different kind of challenge. Our Don Camillo simply has to show that Jesus lived as a historical figure. He, and I, might want to say a great deal more about Jesus than just that, but it is the basis from which we have to start.

"Have you not read, Maestro Peppone, the accounts of the life of Jesus in the four Gospels? I have four witnesses, who support each other, and corroborate each other's stories."

"Bah! Don Camillo. Do you not see that one has copied from the other, and in any case they did not write until a century after the so called time of Jesus. It is hearsay evidence!"

"But you are wrong, friend Peppone. It is a discredited theory to say that the Gospels belong in the second century; They belong before Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, or they

would have mentioned that clearly, and one of them was perhaps mentioned by St. Paul when he wrote to a church in Corinth in 56.

“And as for copying one another, St. Luke tells us that he checked out other eyewitnesses before he did that. Do you think the second edition of a book is less reliable because a second author has collaborated in the work and checked it?”

“Bah! Don Camillo. Do you not see that they are all biased witnesses. They were Christians, all deceived by this fiction. We cannot trust their evidence.”

“But wait, friend Peppone. Do you not know that the great Iulio Cesare invaded Britain? He has told us about it in a book which he wrote himself to show what a splendid general he was. He was the original spin doctor, but no-one doubts that he did it. So it is with the Gospels; they tell Jesus’ story from a Christian standpoint, but that does not mean there was no story to tell. In fact, it means that there was someone, who made such an impression on people that they risked their necks for him.”

“Bah! Don Camillo. You cannot show any other evidence for him though, can you ~ from outside your church?”

“On the contrary, friend Peppone. Both Jews and Roman historians refer to Jesus. There is a place in the Jewish law-books where they talk about blasphemy. It talks about the way the Jews tried to find evidence to acquit Jesus, but even after forty days trying they could not, and he was hanged on Passover eve. They tried hard because, it says, he was near the kingship.”

“Ah! it tells a story, Don Camillo, different from your gospels. That undermines your case, does it not?”

“But no, Peppone, it does not. It actually explains some puzzling bits in St. John’s evidence. When that happens in your court, do you not, as a lawyer, take it even more seriously?”

“Let me ask the questions, Don Camillo. I am sure no sensible Roman would repeat this fabrication about Jesus.”

“On the contrary, Peppone. Suetonius, speaks of riots in Rome in 49 because of someone called Chrestus, and then he says the Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the fire there in 64.”

“Bah! Don Camillo. That proves nothing. It just says that people in Rome lacked the sense to disbelieve the stories.”

“But Peppone, another of them, Tacitus, says even more; he reports that Christians owed their origins to Christ, who had been executed by Pontius Pilate, but had persisted despite that. He is very rude about Christians, but he did have access to the State Papers. He was in government before writing history.”

“In Government? And you believe him, Don Camillo?”

“Of course, friend Peppone. He knew how facts could be used, and so how to weigh evidence, too. He knew how to listen to the evidence of history.

“And do you mean by that, Don Camillo that I do not?”

“I mean that when there is a blip in history, when things change very much, you have to look for a reason. What Jesus said and did was big enough, and different enough, for us to say that there was someone who caused the change. It was not just another strand of Jewishness. And take the Last Supper, for example. Jews taste ‘the bread of affliction, which our fathers ate in Egypt’; we remember that Jesus said that the bread ‘is my body, broken for you.’ To a Jew that is unthinkable. Someone must have been a dynamic enough leader to make many Jews change the key words of their great festival. If you do not believe that Jesus lived, friend Peppone, you will have to invent someone, otherwise unknown to history, who inspired so big a change ~ even if you cannot believe he is God’s son.

“And let me tell you this as well, ...”

“For Christ’s sake, Don Camillo, is there no end to the fables you believe in?”

“For whose sake, Maestro Peppone?”

I have not spelled out all the details of the evidence mentioned in this imaginary exchange, but could do if pressed. What is significant is that the Jewish as well as the Christian evidence agrees in pointing to someone who did do remarkable things. Once this is recognised, we can work through the Christian evidence in the Gospels and begin to see someone conscious of being more than a simple teacher, closer to God than a simple prophet, with a more loving and human touch than a political or social reformer. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Magpie ...

... flew off on a little expedition on one of those brilliantly sunny days in February, only to get a shock. As he looked back at Manchester, the whole area was shrouded in a cloud of mirk, the colour of a thundercloud. In the still air a day's worth of car exhaust and other muck created a layer of pollution 2000 ft high.

NORTHENDEN MILL ~ AGAIN!

A repeat of the note to say that there is a display about the 2005 Mill excavation at the Airport ~ in the Corridor between Terminals 1 and 3.

I will publicise details of this year's dig when I know them myself. There are meetings on 16th Feb. and early March to make some decisions about this. *Greg Forster*

St. Wilfrid's Church,

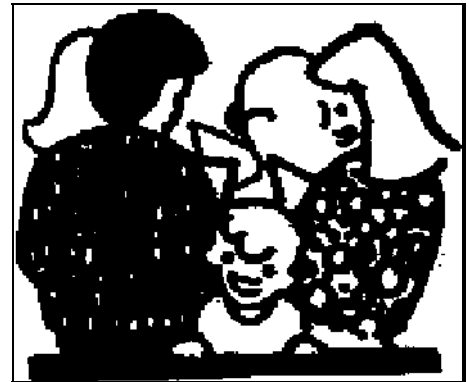
Ford Lane. (Off Church Rd.)

Rector: Greg Forster (998-2615)

Organist: Arthur Mellor (928-0472)

www.stwilfridsnorthenden.org

Services:



On Sundays at 8.00am and on Thursdays at 10.00am there is a Communion service (using the old Prayer Book).

There is a "Sunday Club" for 7 – 11+ year olds in the Rectory at 10.30am, for about an hour, except when there is a Family Service (for parents and children together) in Church. A Sunday School, for children from 3½ to 6+, meets in the Church Hall from 10.30 till about 11.30am.

1st March Ash Wednesday: Communion, 8.00pm

Sun. 5th 10.30am Family Communion & Parade Service

6.30pm United Service

12th 10.30am Holy Communion

6.30pm Evening Worship

19th 10.30am Holy Communion & Baptism

6.30pm Evening Worship

26th 10.30am **Mothering Sunday ~ Family Service***
 6.30pm Holy Communion
 Apr. 2nd 10.30am Holy Communion (“Standard”)
 6.30pm United Evening Worship.

*** Mothering Sunday? ~**

a special invitation to Mothers, Grandmothers, ... &c!
 This will be the “April” Family Service and Parade for Cubs and Brownies. It will not be a communion service, and all families (of whatever shape and size) are invited, and anyone, with or without children, is most welcome.

The next Family Service is Easter Sunday, April 16th.

Please note too that the church is open each Sunday afternoon from 1.45 – dusk, for prayer, visiting, enquiries, &c.

The Rector is usually on hand if you want to talk or ask about anything, or to pray for health and wholeness.

F or your D iaries

Wed. 1st Mar. 8.00pm **Ash Wednesday Service in Church.**
 Sat. 4th., 10.00am ... **Coffee Morning** Church Hall.
 Mon. 6th. 7.45 for 8.00pm **Women’s Group**, Rectory
 Wed. 8th 8.00pm Bible Study; Rectory.
 Tue. 14th @ 7.45. *Civic Society meeting @ Methodist Hall.*
 Wed. 15th 8.00pm Bible Study; Rectory. Also Wed. 22nd
 Thu. 23rd. 7.45pm Church Hall: **PCC** (to be confirmed)
 Sat. 1st Apr. 10.00am ... **Coffee Morning**, Church Hall.
 Mon. 3rd Apr. 7.45 for 8.00pm Women’s Group. Rectory.

WOMEN’S GROUP ...

... will meet as usual on March 6th, and again on April 3rd.
 Lifts can be organised for those without transport. *Sue Forster*

CUBS; A Church supported Cub group (for girls as well as boys) has re-started, using St. Wilfrid’s School on Tuesday evenings, 6.00 – 8.00pm. *For details, contact Mike Clegg on 0161 998 – 4143.* There is, of course, also a Brownies’ group, in the Church Hall on Mondays from 6.00pm.

From the Registers ... In Memoriam ...

James Dunkerley (Greenpark Rd.) 65,
Sarah Toghill (Altrincham Rd.) 96, Olive Edwards (Benchill) 80

Excuse me ... again! GREG Forster .

Last month I talked about getting a new toilet suite in Church during the year. In that connection I should be grateful to hear from any relatives of William **Whitlegg**, who died in 1797 and his wife Martha, who died in 1800. The drainage from the new toilets will have to cut under one corner of their gravestone, outside the south porch, and (as the man said) in order to do that we will need permission from the bodies concerned ~ or, in this case, their next of kin. In fact I suspect that the 1875 drains of the new church already run there, but until we lift the stone we will not know that.

As I also said last month, we need to raise money for this job, since it is not something for which we can claim grants. Letters appealing for help went out in late February, and we are grateful for gifts and offers already received. If you wish to give for this project, please make cheques out to St. Wilfrid's PCC, but send them to me, marked *church toilet fund* or something like that, and (in accordance with Charity Law) I will keep this "restricted" fund separate from the ordinary church accounts. If there is a surplus, I suggest it should go towards the church's share of the *Hall* toilet improvements.

Cartoons & Islam

Greg Forster

Cartoons have hit the headlines in the past month, in a bitter sad sort of way. There was one that amused me: just after the Royal Mail had been fined for losing letters, someone drew a picture of St. Paul beavering away at a manuscript, while someone else peers round a pillar apologetically saying, "*Bad news, Paul. The Royal Mail has lost your letter to the Corinthians.*" There is a double subtlety to this (which the cartoonist may not have realised); it is quite likely that at least one letter from Paul to the church at Corinth has been lost!

Fortunately for this cartoonist Christians have no taboo about pictures ~ though in the past we have had an issue about

religious statues, resolved differently in the Eastern churches, Rome, and the Protestant West. For Islam the situation is different. The worship of the idols of old Arabia was an issue for Mohammed, and he attacked it accordingly, drawing on Jewish and to a lesser extent Christian models. Not only idols, but any representation of the human form was outlawed in the new religion.

So, when we were preparing the new Religious Education syllabus for church schools in the Manchester Diocese some dozen years ago, we added a footnote to the section on Islam warning teachers not to use that old fall back in RE lessons: *“When you have finished you can draw a picture of (in this case) Mohammed receiving the Qur’an from the angel Gabriel.”*

So, in the current controversy, it is the actual pictures of Mohammed which are the cause of offence as much as, if not more than, the content of the lampoon (offensive though that was). That being said, a strict ban on the portrayal of even Mohammed has not always been observed. I have just been looking at a picture, illustrating Mohammed taming a lion. The concession to the ban is this, that the prophet is veiled, his face completely hidden. The picture is Islamic, and dates from the 16th century (CE).

I must say in passing that I have great sympathy with the banning of religious images. That is partly on theological grounds ~ the Reformers were right in asserting the second commandment (against “graven images”) to counter the mediaeval cult of saints’ images and the like. It is also, I suppose, aesthetic. One of the occupational hazards of clergy life is the “trade catalogue”. Every so often we receive mailings from the purveyors of religious requisites. Yesterday’s offering included a range of pottery lustre-ware Jesuses, plus or minus a cross, ostensibly in the agony of the passion but looking more like prancing fairies. With tack like that to be had, why do the anti-religious cartoonists bother? I think twice about putting the brochure out for the recycling wagon in case someone sees it.

But seriously, how should we view what has happened over the past month or so. Was it right to publish those cartoons

of Mohammed? Was it right for Danish Imams to go touting them round the Middle East? Was it right for a minority of Muslim extremists to demonstrate with very threatening banners? Was mainstream Muslim reaction, with its staid march, appropriate?

Firstly, I believe that no religion should avoid legitimate criticism or questioning by invoking its own codes of reverence or pleas of persecution. Criticism should be fair and measured, not scurrilous; but it may use humour as well as straight accusation (several of Jesus' parables are, after all, Jewish jokes at the expense of his religious opponents.) If the criticism is well founded, religious people should learn from it; if it is ill founded then it should be refuted in its own terms. God is big enough, I believe, to survive human affronts.

As a Christian, I see at the heart of my faith a God who took all that we humans could throw at him by way of cruelty and insult, and then rose above it all on the third day. But in particular Islam, because of its historical roots, has criticisms to meet in connection with the use of violence and the relation of religion and state. (Christians are not exempt from criticism on these counts either, though the problems are perhaps less inherent in our basic religious system)

But secondly, those with a criticism to voice, or even an honest attempt to illustrate a point, should be careful to avoid gratuitous offence. I have heard it suggested that the original brief for these contentious cartoons was to find a suitable icon to illustrate Mohammed and his role in Islam, since no picture could readily be found. (There is no clear illustration such as a crucifixion scene, or an empty tomb; Arabic calligraphy of the opening words of the Qur'an or such like is less iconic or informative for those who cannot read it.) If this was the brief, it was misjudged and has backfired, though it is understandable.

Our culture in Europe is so visual that we assume that that is the right and a legitimate way of making a point. We also assume a practical and moral separation of church, media and state (even in nations like England or Denmark with 'established' churches) which is not only rare in the Islamic world, but also runs

counter to the expectation built into the Qur'an and inherent in the religion.

It was this failure by Muslims to understand the western separation of media, religion and government which has led to the widespread and violent demonstrations in the Muslim world. (I dare say there has also been some canny political exploitation of the situation). Such violence may vent a sense of grievance about the specific issue or more widely, but does little to foster understanding or elicit respect from the objects of the anger.

Even a peaceful demonstration on this issue, if it is aimed at a government rather than a publisher, is off target. Such a demonstration really needs to be a general affirmation of values if it is to carry weight. I cannot object to that, having been involved thirty years or so ago in 50,000+ strong "Marches for Jesus" in London, attempting to affirm Christian moral standards. Even so, however, we felt that we did not get the media coverage that the march deserved ~ perhaps it did not contain enough sex or violence for the media, even then!

So, to conclude; no religion should hide behind threats of violence or cries of prejudice to escape legitimate examination, but freedom of expression should not be used as a license for people with an anti-religious axe to grind simply to cause offence. Nastiness is not argument or moral freedom ~ and that comment applies as much to the producers of *Jerry Springer, the Opera* as to *Jullands Post* cartoonists. We who are religious should have broad shoulders, but be prepared to make reasoned, and good humoured, defence of our beliefs. I believe in a God who invented *good* humour.

Cards ~ some with prayers for the sick or bereaved, some with pictures of the church, are available in St. Wilfrid's church. Can you use them, for your own prayers or for a friend?

N orthenden Methodist Church.

Palatine Road.

Minister: the Revd. David Bown,

5 Kenworthy Lane, Northenden, M 22 4 JF 0161 998 – 2158

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Wythenshawe Meeting

**There is a meeting for worship
at the friends' Meeting House, Wythenshawe Rd.,
At 10.30am every Sunday.**

Children welcome

Details from Judith Mawer (445 – 9397)

The main hall and smaller rooms are available for hire;
~ contact Meeting House Warden (998-3031, or 07749419197)