

Special interests

Romans 8:5-11

Sadly I have never been asked to choose my eight records for Desert Island Discs. Another thing I have never had to fret about is writing an entry for myself for Who's Who. Pippa has both an uncle and a cousin in that venerable publication, but that is really enough name-dropping for one sermon! Actually what would worry me most about being in Who's Who would be the thought that at any time you might demoted to the sister publication "Who *was* who". But just think for a moment if we were all asked to write such an entry. One of the things they list are your interests. Think for a moment of what you would put - what are your special interests in life? I wonder how many people reading or listening to this would include any spiritual interests in that list.

Let me refer you again to the brilliant translation of some notorious obscure words of St Paul which we hear in the New Testament reading - "The unspiritual are interested only in what is unspiritual, but the spiritual are interested in spiritual things." If we are brutally honest we can work back from that to the imaginary entry that you listed for yourself. If there was nothing, or little there which was in any sense "spiritual", does that perhaps indicate that you are not as spiritual a person as you might be? It would seem a logical thought, which at least ought to be pursued. Paul had no doubt that it mattered - you recall he said that "it is death to limit yourself to what is unspiritual" - it is quite literally a dead-end interest. But the word "limit" is important - Paul is not here advocating some kind of monastic single-mindedness which means that secular interests are inappropriate or wrong. He said it was a dead-end to *limit* yourself to such things - because of course they do not, as far as orthodox theology is concerned anyway, survive the end of this life. There is no indication in scripture of heavenly golf-courses, or celestial flower-arranging. But our interest in the spiritual will go through death - so in terms of long-term investment, they are a good thing. Moreover, Paul goes on to say that limiting oneself to the unspiritual is putting ourselves at odds with God.

I looked some years ago to see what various people who appeared in the Church of England Year Book put down as their special interests - and I found what seemed to be very healthy entries - for instance the Bishop of Lichfield had down "Russian literature, Baroque music, Walking, African Church History and Theology." - or a Lay member of General Synod who listed "Church Finance, Pastoral Organisation and non-league football". They seemed to have some balance, as opposed to those who only listed interest in the arts and countryside, or those who only listed "ecumenism, history of liturgy" or people like the then Bishop of London, who didn't profess to have any interests at all.

So let's come back to ourselves - and our mythical entry. Is our faith a special interest? After all, for all but a handful of us, it can't be assumed that it is, because it is our job. If spiritual things are to be part of what people see as our abiding passions, we need to make it clear. I said that it was a notoriously difficult passage to translate - let me underline that by reading a tiny bit from another version, which brings out another strand of what Paul was driving at. Where the version we heard said "The unspiritual are only interested in what is unspiritual" another translation reads "Those who live by what human nature wants." In other words - interests - real interests - *dominate* and control. So if we are really interested in spiritual things, they v/ill control the way we live - and, as Paul warns, the same is true of unspiritual things. And this of course links in

with our gospel reading, where Jesus says, with the Old Testament, that we must love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. He goes on to say that we must show as much enthusiasm for loving our neighbour as we show for loving ourselves.

Most of us have a long way to go before we would be able to own up to fulfilling that to any extent. For some faith is fairly peripheral - something which has its moments, and occasionally is very important, but which hardly dominates our thinking. But that is what a real interest should do. Religion is not a hobby, but an interest. Maybe we are afraid of being thought to be religious fanatics. But the truth is we are on the whole fairly badly informed, and really show very little enthusiasm about spiritual things. I remember this being pointed up for me when someone asked me to show some Muslim students round church. I was all set to talk very simply about how the building displayed aspects of the Christian faith. And that was all knocked on the head when the first question one of them asked was "Did the Church of England follow the German or the Swiss Reformers in their Eucharistic theology?" Now, the last thing I want to suggest is that we should all know the answer to a question like that - but it maybe underlines the difference of the levels of interest we and they take. Our faith, if it is real, should display some kind of enthusiastic outworking, in some form or other. And I am not saying that because it seems like a good idea, but because it is what our readings today have said.