

Thinking like Christians

Philippians 2.5

I remember an American TV series years ago called *The Paper Chase*. In the credits a rather convincing character of a law professor tells his new students that they come in with minds full of mush, and that if they survive they will leave thinking like lawyers. I rather hope that the same thoughts, even if not similarly expressed are said by theological college staffs. The great need of any future clergyman is not necessarily vast knowledge about the teaching of the Fathers, or textual variants in Isaiah, but the ability to think theological - to think Christianly, if I may coin a rather ugly word. And after all that is the command of the letter of Paul in the epistle - think like Christ. 'Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus' was how we used to hear it. It is a notoriously difficult text to translate, and the New English Bible, together with most modern versions prefers: 'Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus.' That raises two important points. Our mind, as the Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments use it, is more or less the same as our heart, or our way of living. There is a total interweaving of mind and action. The way that a man thinks defines the way he lives. A man's motives decide his aims, and his aims decide actions. So we have examples in the Old Testament of the idea of "thinking" - mind being much the same as the soul, as the spirit, as the heart. Indeed Hebrew usage completely mixes those up. Where we would say 'It came into my mind' the equivalent Hebrew usage is that it came into my "heart". We use heart to suggest the seat of emotions, the Hebrews used their bowels, if you will pardon the expression. The heart therefore, the centre of thinking, of feeling and of action. Our mind, our bearing towards one another - indeed every attitude and every thought and feeling is to arise out of our life in Christ. In other words, the fact that we are Christians, that we are members of his body, that we are members one of another, is to be such a radical force in our lives that all our thinking is to change. But thinking is one of the things that doesn't seem to be very popular in Christian circles. That sounds rather damning and it is meant to be. I reckon the majority of churchgoers rarely think very hard about their faith. And whereas the avid car enthusiast knows the new models, and reads the reviews as they appear, and the avid gardener is aware of the latest insecticide, or the best varieties to grow - if they happen to be Christian car enthusiasts, or Christian gardeners, it will probably be true that they know more up-to-date facts about the car and the garden than they do about their faith. And very often they will avoid Christian thinking for Christian pat answers. I occasionally have been asked 'Have you got a book on so-and-so - I want to tell a friend at work what Christians say about....' The extreme bits of the church may try to give the pat answers.... the fundamentalist may say "The Scriptures say..." as if they had closed all discussion on the topic by so doing. And the old-fashioned catholic may quote Mother Church in some long-forgotten document and statement of Pope or Patriarch. But we all know that neither of these will do. We need, of course we need to know what the scriptures say. And indeed we will be wise to discover what the general drift of Christian tradition has been over the centuries. But neither can be said to be Christian thinking.

What we need to develop in ourselves is a Christian world-view - the expression is really a cumbersome one in English - the word I am after exists only in German - *Weltanschauung* - a way of perceiving things that stems from the kind of people we are - a world perspective which is totally governed by our life in Christ. What are the ingredients we require to get such a perspective? Let me suggest four.

The first is TIME. There are no instant answers if we want to learn to think in a Christian way. It is what the New Testament calls the re-making of our minds. And that inevitably involves destruction as well as construction. We will have thought in secular ways which are not appropriate. We were, in Paul's terms, worldly rather than spiritual. So it will be God's gift gradually to remake our thinking And that process will never be complete. To quote a song of Sydney Carter - these will be nothing fixed and final. When Cliff Richard became a Christian he was pushed, perhaps rather unwisely, into writing a hook called "The Way I see it". I was glad to see that some years later, and had matured very considerably in his faith, he was brave enough to write another called "The Way I see it now" Of course it had changed, So has my thinking. I often get rather frightened when I read some of the things I preached fifty years ago. But then I hope that will be true of what I am preaching now, that when I look back in another ten years time, if I am still around, which probably unlikely, my mind will be a little nearer to the mind of Christ, my thinking will be that much more Christian. We need time....time on a life-time scale. And we also need time here and now to allow that process to begin and continue. People need to set time aside, for the other three things that I suggest are part of the process of acquiring a Christian mind.

The second need is WORSHIP. That may seem at first an odd requirement - to many people worship and the world are not very closely allied: they leave the world with their umbrella in the church porch. But that should not be so. We bring the world in with us, to pray about it, and we are sent out into it at the end of our worship. But in the meantime, we are involved in an activity which allows us to see the world more clearly, and with a Christian mind. There was an old Latin tag, to the effect that what you prayed and sang about was what ultimately you believed. And that is generally true. The chances are that most Anglicans could quote far more hymns than they could the Bible. What we sing, what we say together, gets to be part of us, and strongly influences our thinking. Therefore in creating a Christian mind, we will be richer in proportion to the amount of time we spend in worship. And quite apart from that, worship is an essential element if we are to have the right perspective. Because in worship we are acknowledging the importance, the relevance and the involvement of the unseen with the seen....of the heavenly with the earthly. We may well say- there were 100 at church this morning...and to an extent that is true, until we remember the words that we say: "Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven". Our worship is just a small part of the worship of God taking place at all times throughout this world, and in heaven. We are joining with the heavenly host, if you like. And that kind of perspective changes our conception of the world. It involves a different conception of time because we are trying to see things in the light of eternity. It involves a different set of value judgements about people and things - indeed it will involve the suspension of value judgements in relation to people because we are to love all men. It involves a different conception about the future, because we come into worship assuming that the future is in God's hands, that the Kingdom will come, and his will will be done on earth as in heaven, one day. We look for the coming of Christ in glory. All these things, which we take for granted as part of worship, but which the world ignores are part of the creating of a Christian mind.

Of course we need KNOWLEDGE. And the opportunities to acquire knowledge are so remarkable compared with those our forefathers had: we are incredibly lucky. Most people can read, and there is no shortage of books. There are opportunities for study at every level, in churches, adult education classes, on line and so on. The Christian who wants to stretch the mind has only to ask around, and will be given plenty of ways to do so. There is no excuse apart from laziness not to stretch our minds to the limits of their capacity. To the vague about our faith is something we choose to be, by default. Of course it takes effort, and the acquiring of knowledge will probably challenge some of our assumptions, and that can be disturbing. But then that is

precisely what Christ's teaching has always done - from the days of the scribes and Pharisees onwards. No Christian thinking is going to be worthwhile unless there are facts.

And we need FELLOWSHIP - that is true in getting any life-style, is it not? People move to a new job, and the others already there are anxious to show them 'How we do things here'....the policies, attitudes and unwritten codes that inform everything that is done. The ethos of any group is decided by the group. And so the group itself as a group is important in getting the world-view right as a Christian. It means, and an important bit this is, that we know each other well in a particular community, and can talk, discuss and argue productively. But it also means knowing how others think - how other denominations think - what is going on in the whole Christian world, around the globe. The blessed company of all believers, as the Prayer Book put it. What is God saying to us all at this moment? The Christian mind will be deeply affected by the depth and honesty of the Christian fellowship.

So - four things to help us think Christianly – Time, Worship, Knowledge and Fellowship. Take a few moments to reflect on how you are using each of those.