

Lent Talk 2008 – 1     ‘Generations of change.’

My father's father was born 123 years ago, in the rapidly expanding industrial heart of Ebbw Vale. His father had been a peasant labourer in South Wiltshire, who migrated north like hosts of others, to where work and a prosperity seemed possible. At twenty he joined the stream of migrants to America, where he spent two years learning to be steel erector, in Philadelphia and then in Manhattan. He returned home to marry his sweetheart and turned his work experience upside down, moving from skyscrapers to the steel framework shoring up deep mine shafts. He moved his family around the South Wales coalfield, following those projects that expanded the mining industry, twenty one pits in as many years, before settling down into mine management.

He was fifty years in the coal industry, including the Wars. During the first War, two of his three brothers were killed fighting abroad. Mining was just as dangerous, but he survived his working career, living on until he was ninety four. I tell you about him because his life characterises the century he lived in.

People uprooting themselves in search of work seizing the opportunities offered by economic development, changing the face of town and country populations in the industrialising nations. Similar movements continue in developing countries today. From this year, more than half the planet's population now live in cities, a tenfold increase in a century.

While he was working in New York on one of the early skyscrapers, the first electric street lighting appeared, the first radio signals were being broadcasted across the Atlantic. Within a couple of decades he was teaching himself to build crystal sets and tuning in to the fledgling BBC. Post second world war, his early fascination with things electronic found him buying army surplus cathode ray tubes from radar equipment and adapting them for TV reception, before he could afford a television himself. Despite the fearful destructive power of the atomic bomb, nuclear power offered him hope for a future where people no long had to dig coal out of the ground for energy. He lived to know about ERNIE, the

computer the size of a house that generated the winning numbers for premium bonds, and marvelled in what might come next.

When I was a child he taught me the rudiments of Geology, and to look with interest at the environment. He'd look me with a glint in his eye, pipe in mouth, and say : "The future will be all built around electricity." I'm sure he'd be amazed at what's happened in the thirty years since he died computers with the power of ERNIE in palm of your hand, plus the Internet. Travel : he never flew on a plane. People doing what he did in 1904 by boat, now routinely cross continents and oceans in hours. The thought of being able to see people you talk to live on the other side of the globe, with a domestic consumer device only existed in Dan Dare comics when he retired from work. He would enjoy it all I'm sure, because he loved the thought of progress, of it all being better for his children and grandchildren than they had been for him.

'Faith in the Future is the theme of these talks.

I've described to you a man who believed there was better to come. He believed in the human project, despite the capability he knew we have for messing it up. He retained the classic optimism of a migrant worker all his life. It was a hard life but it didn't reduce him to despair. He was Anglican by birth, but he didn't go to church much, and would rather have had a grandson who was a scientist than a priest. But he bought a big Bible and maintained in it a family record of births marriages and deaths, and regarded it with respect.

He worked in an industry where God didn't come into what was done, although miners could sing hymns as they went up down and up the pit shaft to and from work. Working in a high risk industry meant that he was familiar with death and disability, with the capriciousness of nature. Individuals injured or in danger of death from roof falls or fires would call upon God, and even pray together if such piety was part of their lives on the surface. But they weren't all actively religious. It wasn't really my grandfather disbelieved – for him that would have been too much like those damned anarchist and communist troublemakers on whom he

poured scorn. God was a bit at distance while he got on with earning his living, or tasting the pleasure of progress, the wonders of science or the natural world. The rituals of the church had a place as part of the order of serious things in life, but his heart and society was more in extended family than in community, or in conventional worship.

He was not untypical, I suspect, of many twentieth century industrial men, no longer at home with the spiritual offerings of the church, but certainly not without a regard for life that is close to awe and wonder, and leads to a kind of natural contemplation and communion. Did that lead him to a personal faith in God of the kind committed believers seek? I'm not sure. In a way he was typical of a age in which traditional expressions of Christianity were already under question, and church attendance starting to wither away.

He was brought up under the British Empire, and lived long enough to see it laid to rest, content with constitutional monarchy, and not a revolutionary iconoclast or ideologue, as were some of his generation. It's a long way we've come from the British Empire in the steam age, to the electronic global village of the jet age, in the thirty years since he died. Change at a speed that would have astonished even him, a man so open to the future, so confident in what it might bring.

Today we may feel justified in being somewhat less confident. We may value progress, but cannot ourselves begin to get the measure of it. So much that's new is happening all the time, the world's store of scientific data is doubling very couple of years. It's hard to keep up with technical innovation and new theories and practical ideas based upon the use of new tools we've hardly even heard of. Yet we can if we wish be better informed than ever about developments and changes going on anywhere on this planet. The internet, over the past fifteen years has turned this into the information age.

Not every kind of information makes us happy or comfortable or excited over the future. Data about global warming, pollution, endemic poverty and seemingly unmanageable conflicts in far flung corners, not to mention economic crises that

shake the global economy faster than a flu pandemic – all these things cause us disquiet, make us wonder if we have any right to have faith in the future, faith in progress.

But these very concerns turn me back to the other sense of meaning of those words, 'faith in the future'. My grandfather's life experience, a century ago took him places unimaginable to his grandfather, born in 1820. Such faith as he had was already shaped quite differently from the faith of his agricultural labouring forebears in deepest south Wiltshire, even though both would be able to identify themselves nominally as 'Church of England' – we didn't call ourselves Anglican in those days.

By faith here, I'm not referring to religious practices as such, ceremonies, rituals pious habits, nor the peculiar customs and beliefs that belong to the realm of religious observance as such. Faith, as I use it, refers to the person's mind-set, their attitude toward life, the universe and everything, the inner relationship they have with the source of their own being, or whatever you prefer to call God, the ultimate reality of existence.

Faith in this sense is to be found, and can thrive in the most diverse of religious and cultural settings. Other religions look and feel quite different from our own viewed from afar. But the closer you get, the more you stand alongside people of other faiths on pilgrimage, at prayer, or if privileged to be welcomed into the home of another, sit at table with them, talk about family with them, you find a rich seam of human experience in common, of what it means to have a faith and live by it, successfully or otherwise. The present era of movement of people, to a much greater extent than in times of Empire or World War, has made for us neighbours, colleagues, even friends from people of other faiths.

We find ourselves experiencing the same kind of challenges from social change and its effect on traditional religious culture, and know that there are at least some people like ourselves in cherishing their spiritual inheritance, however much different from ours it may be.

Among those who have detached themselves from traditional expressions of religion, there is still a sense that faith of a sort persists and will persist even when religion has changed to the extent beyond recognition and acceptance. This isn't faith as conformity to a set of beliefs in the form of propositions you have to stick to, but as deep trust and openness to the other, God and human. It's faith as spirit rather than rule.

Evolution in the life of faith continues in our generation, as it did in generations before us. The chief difference is the speed of change in which our lives are set, determining how we respond, what we discern as being most important to us. What interests me is how faith is changing, in relationship to our lives, more than how the practice of religion as such is growing, declining or simply mutating into something different.

In the wake of the invention of the printing press the reformation happened, as the Bible became widely distributed, read and debated. The historic church of Western Europe split over how to interpret and apply the teaching of the Bible. Protestantism in some of its expressions radically simplified church life and gave to ordinary lay people new responsibilities for building worshipping community and maintaining life in society. The industrial revolution flourished as a result of protestant creativity and enterprise. The thinking of the Enlightenment era which was contemporaneous with industrial expansion put the spotlight on humanity, rights, justice, democracy and freedom confronting traditional hierarchical and authoritarian ways and the rule of religious leaders.

Protestant reform paved the way for the kind of secular world we now have, in which religion has been largely pushed out of the public domain and left as a personal and private affair of no consequence for life in society. And yet, with the unprecedented movement of people around the world, the dominance of the enlightened secular cultural environment is being questioned if not challenged by the presence of Muslims in significant numbers – not as a tiny minority in a cultural enclave, tolerate but of no importance, but in numbers large enough to

represent the full diversity of the Islamic world, from illiterate rural peasants like my great grandfather, to highly educated world citizens of great stature with a definite conviction that God cannot be pushed out of the public realm, and able to argue their case reasonably and sensibly.

Paradoxically this can give comfort and confidence to beleaguered Christians who have been too timid to speak up in their own defence, even though the presence of a religious competitor may be something of a source of discomfort. Having had a near total religious monopoly on culture and society for more than a millennium, Christianity in Europe now finds itself a multi-faith, multi-cultural society in a way that has been normal in other parts of the world for millennia. We have much to learn from both the successes and mistakes of newcomers. These are all unusual occurrences, to stimulate thought. It should make us wonder how will faith be lived out in the coming decades of this century? Will religious institutions die after all, or will they change in ways we find hard to accept? But more importantly, what about our attitude to life, as life's changes themselves educate us to think differently about who we are, who God is, and what our existence is all about. More on who we are, this time next week.