

“SEARCH FOR TRUTH, SEARCH FOR GOD”

ANNUAL LECTURE GIVEN BY BISHOP WILLIE WALSH

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Good afternoon,

When Canon Hilary invited me some months ago to give a talk at a meeting of the Open Christianity Network I did not understand that giving a talk would be transformed into the slightly more daunting “delivering the Annual Lecture”!

That said I am happy and indeed privileged to be with you on this occasion.

I have chosen to speak under the title “Search For Truth, Search For God” simply because it reflects in some way my own search for meaning, my own struggle to make sense of life and to give some direction to my daily living. I will therefore try to address a number of related issues among which are: the image of God as the Truth, the journey from the God of Fear to the God of Love. I will say something of the struggles In Faith especially for people on the margins, and the need to always speak the truth in love.

1. On the Margins – Speaking the truth in love

I have the impression that the Open Christianity Network holds up wide open a very large umbrella under which many Christians shelter and they find in this shelter a place of acceptance, encouragement and inspiration that they do not necessarily find in their own particular Christian Church. We speak of those on the margins of the established Christian churches who find it hard to be at home with some of their individual Church’s teachings, viewpoints, actions etc. They may find their Church, when viewed in the context of today’s lecture title “Search for Truth, Search for God”, to be a place that might be described in fewer words such as: “For Truth, For God”, End of story! Missing from a lot of people’s experience of Church is the key word of this title namely: **Search**.

Many of us would find it difficult to leave our own particular Church – we would miss it far more than we would be missed ourselves - There is so much tied up with our membership of Church that it becomes more than an institution or set of creeds. It is a community of believers and indeed very akin to a family. It is not easy to leave your family even if at times you sense that it is dysfunctional. Hence many choose to be on the edges, the margins of their Church family. They have still that longing and desire to be part of the family but do not feel fully at home because it falls short of what they feel a Christian family should be.

In recent years of course many have chosen to leave their Churches. This has certainly been the case in my own-Roman Catholic. While being saddened by their decision to leave, I can understand their reasons for doing so. Some who leave have left quietly and some have left not so quietly. There is that humorous line about the difference between English and Irish people when it comes to leaving the Church. Seemingly, the English just get on with it and leave, going quietly and gently shutting the door behind them. The Irish Catholic doesn't find it quite so easy to activate departure. Oh yes, The Irish will leave the Church alright but many make sure to bang the door after them so that all the dishes on the dresser will shake at their leaving!

Humour aside, it must be said that to leave the Church of your birth and upbringing is indeed a huge decision for anyone to make. It is a brave decision and one not made lightly. The bonds that tie you to Church and a faith tradition are very strong. The decision to leave is a decision that calls for respect.

People on the margins of our Churches are not leavers. They are “remainers” who find their own patch on the outskirts of town. Generally speaking people on the margins do not have this “notice me” mentality. If anything they feel that the margins have all the effects of making the heart grow fonder and indeed in the struggles of believing they find Faith strengthened rather than diminished. So I would like to present myself to you as someone who respects those on the margins of the Church and all who inhabit it for reasons of conscience.

At times I have had the feeling of being on the margins myself and I have found it to be a lonely place. It can also be a place of tensions – tension between loyalty to one’s colleagues and being true to oneself, tension between a desire not to expose oneself to the harsh winds of criticism and the self-criticism of lack of courage.

I would suggest however that in all matters of exploring the Truth and in putting forward our personal views that we should do so in a real spirit of humility. I feel that we can sometimes get carried away not so much by the sound of our own voices but rather by the strength of our feelings on a subject and we end up becoming dogmatic, intransigent and disrespectful of those (often, dare I say: Church Leaders?) to whose views we are in such opposition. Any strongly held view should I feel be seasoned with a touch of humility in the hope that it will lead us to do unto others as we would like them to do unto us.

It can sometimes happen that people on the margins tend to blur the difference between truth and honesty. I see honesty as my expressing what I perceive to be the truth. At the same time I need to be careful not to attribute dishonesty to the person who may perceive truth in a manner that is contrary to mine. The mission Statement of the Open Christianity Network is one that I think seeks to give space and toleration to all who seek to express their perception of God. To speak the truth (our truth) in love must always be our aim.

2. God the Truth

As I have said already the word search is key to the title of this lecture: Search For Truth, Search for God”. I think it is a given of the title and one that I accept that Truth is synonymous with God. It is the theological interpretation of God in John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through me”.

I think of the Christian life of each one of us as a journey towards that truth, as a search for God or if you like our growing in awareness of God. For me such is the true meaning of Search in this context – searching for God in all aspects of life. Above all I stress the value of often finding truth in the very process of questioning rather than in mere acceptance of answers others have handed to us.

There is a purity about truth that suggests it is not tainted with deceit and in human dealings we find truth to be refreshing, powerful, often painful but eventually liberating. Apply this word Truth to God and it takes on a magnificence beyond our imagining. In human terms therefore we can only attain glimpses of the Truth that is God. God who is Truth is untainted, unlimited, all powerful, painfully challenging and above all liberating to all who follow the path of God.

3. From God of Fear to God of Love

Which brings me neatly to our understanding of God. The image of God that many of us older ones were reared with was that of an aged grey-haired man who kept a list of all the bad things you did and that list would be produced on judgement day and only He would decide whether it was hell or at best purgatory. One never presumed that one was worthy of heaven in the first instance-indeed we were often warned about the sin of presumption. I still remember by heart how it was expressed in the Catechism: "Presumption: A foolish expectation of salvation without making proper use of necessary means to obtain it". Like many of my generation I grew up being taught that Salvation was earned not deserved!

I grew up with that Old Testament God – Fear of God is the beginning of Wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). I carried it with me right through my secondary school days. Only recently when asked why did I decide to study for the priesthood after my Leaving Cert I had to honestly reply that one of my principal motivations was that I saw it as giving me the best chance of saving my soul. My upbringing and early schooling inculcated that sense of a strict God in many of my generation and I am sure that many of you who are in the forty-five upward age bracket received that sense of an often angry God who needed placating. I like to think that that motivation for priesthood became more generous as the years went by. Thankfully, we came to a better understanding and moved away from that image of God to a more enlightened understanding of a God of Love, of Gentleness and Compassion.

But let me warn you about the fearsome God - He hasn't gone away completely! He tends to sneak back in occasionally as the lights on the horizon of life grow dimmer.

What image of God did I put in place of the angry reckoning God? I mentioned the God of Love, of Gentleness and Compassion. This is the God manifested by Jesus in his life. It is the image of God I am drawn toward and which I hope I have lived in my ministry as priest and bishop. This is the gentler God of feelings and understanding of humankind and all its frailties. It is an image of God that upsets a more conservative and fundamentalist element in our Churches. It is this image of God they would claim has made us soft on sin and as a result is the root cause of all the trouble in the Catholic Church today. I have to respect their right to hold such a view but it is totally at variance with my understanding of God. It is too fundamental a view of life that will only in time lead to restricted and dysfunctional growth in the body of the Church. Some of the most difficult encounters of my own time as a bishop have been with a very small number of lay people and priests who hold such fundamental views. Whilst I have striven to make room for their views they appear to find it difficult to reciprocate that respect for opposing views.

I just cannot bring myself to believe that a God who gave me life, a God whose constant message is one of love could condemn me to everlasting punishment. I could not believe in a harsh, unloving God. I find atheism more attractive and understandable than a vengeful theism. Was it that same vengeful theism that led to so many wars, crusades, inquisitions, burnings at the stake of heretics and witches? Our world still suffers great violent unrest inspired often by this vengeful theism. There can be no place for it in Christianity.

4. Faith – Search and Struggle

I have said already that we must be humble in our search for God and open to possibilities of Revelation in many places and in many people. Above all, the true searcher after Truth must be open to the unexpected not only when it brings comfort but also discomfort of challenging us out of our easy lives. Am I able or humble enough to let others reveal God to me? Ministers of religion are accustomed to be the proclaimers of truth but not as accustomed to being proclaimed to by the words and example of others.

When I think of or speak about God I know I am reaching out into an unfathomable space beyond our rational experience. God is unknowable –

beyond our imagining. God is Mystery. Not just a mystery among many other mysteries, but God is The Mystery.

It is when confronted with the mystery that is God that many of us find that faith is a struggle. If we are honest with ourselves I think the struggle to believe is a fundamental part of our make-up as human beings. Some choose not to admit of struggle and go instead for the comfort of the tight embrace of a Faith that blocks out any hint of the struggle. The American writer Garrison Keillor humorously but tellingly wrote about Holy Week in the Chicago times. I would like to share two short snippets of what he had to say:

“Holy Week is a good time to face the question: Do we really believe in that story (Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ) or do we just like to hang around with nice people and listen to organ music? There are advantages, after all, to being in the neighbourhood of people who love their neighbours.”

Keillor was not having a go at or making fun of people who believe or who struggle with belief. He goes on:

“Scepticism is a stimulant, not to be repressed. It is an antidote to smugness and the great glow of satisfaction of being right. You know the self-righteous – (haven’t we all been there at times?) – the little extra topspin they put on the truth, the ostentatious modesty, the pleasure they take in being beautifully modulated and cool and correct when others are falling apart. Jesus was rougher on these people than on the adulterers and prostitutes. So I will sit in the doubters chair for a while and see what is to be learned back there.”

I feel that all of us could benefit by resting a while in the doubters’ chair. Aren’t there times when you wonder why the wars, the hatred, the tragedies, earthquakes, flooding, and famines, the pain and suffering within so many families. And where is the Just and Loving God in the midst of all these

sorrows? Is it too simplistic of me to suggest that it is because of that war, that hatred, those tragedies, that pain and suffering that we need God?

5. Faith a Gift and a Decision

We often say that faith and belief in God is a gift from God and of course it is. It is also a gift from parents and the whole environment in which we happened to be raised.

I like to think at this stage of my life that faith and belief in God is something of a decision – that amidst the doubts and questions, amidst the joys and sorrows, amidst the successes and failures I have made a decision to believe. I regard myself as having been very blessed in life – blessed with friends whom I love and who love me, blessed with good health at 76 years. Yes, of course, there have been disappointments, hopes shattered and dreams unfulfilled. I do however have a real sense of a greater power out there who cares for me. Yes, I am deeply aware of the appalling suffering of so many people in our world, aware of the injustices, aware of the lack of love shown to so many people in so many ways. But if there is no “beyond” then life to me would be meaningless and all the more unfair. My belief helps me to fight against such unfairness and injustice.

Maybe as one grows older one needs to have the courage and trust to let go a little, to let go of some of the certainties we had or thought we had in earlier life and instead allow God to be God – unknowable, beyond my imagination.

One needs to have the courage and trust to realise:

That our God is not just true but is the Truth.

That our God is not just compassionate but is Compassion.

That our God is not just loving but is Love.
