

Nature is forever on the move: and so are we. Faith consists of allowing this movement to take place rather than resisting it – it's perfectly natural after all. But the Pharisees in today's gospel story have become stuck in a certain way of looking at the world and one another – a group mentality which can and does give religion a bad name. This came home to me yesterday reading a passage in James Rebanks' book 'English Pastoral, an Inheritance' which is a close examination of how farming and farmers have become stuck in a modernising tendency which is going nowhere and the need to re-examine their inheritance to find new ways forward – he's exploring ways of re-wilding while also keeping the farm financially viable, and this is the line that struck me

'It is OK to admit you don't know, or that you might have been wrong previously. That pragmatism is perhaps my father's most useful legacy. He and my grandfather didn't do all the things I am doing, because in their eras it wasn't expected of them. I can respect their good sense, and their work, without copying their every move like some kind of religion.'

Ah! So that's what people think of religion – something stuck in the past and unchanging, a repetitive set of behaviours to keep us in our place, the sacrifice of freedom that we make in order to get into heaven and so on. It's a pity that religion has got this particular reputation because it's a dynamic operative everywhere but perhaps it's become a fixed idea partly because the Bible is full of it and it's precisely this sort of religiosity which Jesus is challenging – the idea that stops people moving on, restricts their table fellowship, fosters a them and us mentality, the saved and the unsaved- as if we are able to judge. And when we fall into this trap what we miss, though of course we won't know it, is the vital role of diversity in our lives and indeed in life itself – the diversity that keeps life going. To push the farming analogy a little further: what James Rebanks, and many farmers are beginning to realise, or put a name to, is that vast monocultures of heavily sprayed crops or heavily dosed livestock, will eventually exhaust the soil and all our medicinal means of coping with disease. We're on a hiding to nothing – or rather a few people are becoming very rich with this style of living but at the expense of the rest of us, and the rest of the natural world. And, as in the Bible the short-sightedness and injustice of this system of sacrificing others on the altar of profit was well-known to such prophets as Amos, Isaiah and as we hear today, Hosea.

'The love of yours is like a morning cloud, like the dew that quickly disappears. This is why I have torn them to pieces by the prophets, why I slaughtered them with the words from my mouth, since what I want is love (or mercy) not sacrifice, knowledge of God, not holocausts.'

When we act justly and love tenderly, when we eat with all and sundry for example, we allow religion to recover it's good name. It's this sort of sacrifice which Jesus makes for us and shows us how to make for others – it's always costly but the rewards are immense. Of course I might be wrong there: but let's try it and see. As we heard in the final antiphon at Lauds this morning '*Let everything that lives and that breathes give praise to the Lord.'* - now that's religion for you.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour