

Getting Everything Right–Balanced

The briefest reading of the gospels, and other parts of the New Testament, shows various very different – contrary, even seemingly-contradictory – things being advocated, and revealed, *at the same time*. Thus it is possible for one person to read it in a way which might make Christianity seem to be very different from that known by someone else's reading; indeed, Christian history has shown how all too easy it is to develop something which is seemingly entirely of one's own. These different things - different emphases - could be seen as the product of New Testament writers and propagandists promoting what were their own understandings. Equally, they could be placed there – revealed - together on purpose, and our job might be that of *holding* them together, accepting the tensions of living with seemingly-contrasting principles.

The answer, I consider, is to get the *balance* right - and avoid the natural inclination to try to deny those things, on one side, which don't seem to suit our temperament, or to find reasons, by some casuistry or other, for convincing ourselves that *that* isn't the real Christianity, *that* isn't what Jesus *really* said (we might just blame the Early Church and gospel writers for squeezing it in, with whatever degree of bad motivation we can think of; it's easy to do).

The most obvious tension is between a purely-this-worldly and a next-worldly concern. Time and again, Jesus gives considerable weight to the need to prevent injustice, and bring peace, to *this* world, and his peace is beyond human understanding. In the "sheep and the goats" story (Matthew Ch. 25) his imperative of love and service - towards people existing in the here-and-now - is sovereign, inescapable and unavoidable, laying a duty upon all of us that has no qualification or limitations. But elsewhere, he makes clear that this thing which he has come to inaugurate - his Kingdom - is *not* of this world.

Often we learn that though our conduct must be concerned with *this* world, its objective is really elsewhere - for this world is "passing away". Another tension, of much importance, is related to what I call *communalism*. Jesus is concerned with community, with just living between people, with simple truth and fairness; Christianity - it has rightly been said - cannot be anything solely about a person's private concerns with their own soul, a spirituality of purely-personal significance. Christ's church exists to serve and create *community*; but to see it in these terms alone is to fall into unbalance, to court the disaster of distortion - for each time Jesus has a personal encounter, he speaks to the very centre of *an individual*. In so many gospel passages, one can see his eyes seeming to bore right through a person to the heart, as he presents them with inescapable choices, requiring decision, action, and total change, from which only the most intransigent will go away sad. Encounter with Jesus (his recorded words alone are sufficient, now) was always an individual - not a communal - event. A balance we have to strike is between a concern with our self – our destiny - and with others. We must accept the gift of salvation by faith, by Jesus's saving acts; but we must not, thereby, be tempted to ignore the Epistle of James's warning that faith without works is of no avail.

Whenever the right balance is lost, then there is the strong possibility of badness and errors; the classic heresies are just these kind of things, where one truth has been exaggerated to the detriment of another, and Jesus's dual nature, human and divine, is the tension that became unbalanced in most of them - and so many of our modern distortions are simply, it has been said, new versions of those old kinds of distortion: decrepit, aged sheep in contemporary wolves' designer outfits. One constant imbalance in Christian faith is the overemphasis of reason as against feeling and experience - or the other way around. Try to do without either, and severe problems follow; and today, it is an excess of belief in feeling and emotion which must be curbed, and reason and argument returned. Holding contraries in the right balance is not easy, many fail, perhaps all of us at some time or other; Christianity is far from being the easiest faith to follow, it always contains the pitfall of unbalance, which trips up many, and removing "difficult" ideas, just to make it simpler for us, can only take us from reality to fantasy.