

Spirituality Lent: 2011

What does the term 'Spirituality' mean to you? Today it has become an 'in' word and can cover everything from 'getting up close to nature' to different moral, ethical codes, to a diverse range of esoteric and sometimes occult practices. In recent years research has pointed to an upsurge in an interest in films and books on the supernatural; ghosts, Angels, Demons and miracles. For instance the Dan Brown books and the 'Twilight' series.

In his book; *The Worship Mall*; Dr Bryan Spinks; (professor of liturgical studies and pastoral Theology at Yale Divinity School) comments on a quote from John Drane's book 'The Mc Donaldization of the church' (and yes, that is the title!) Drane writes; *'The church as we know it is in decline. On the other [hand], there is the equally incontrovertible fact that we live in a time when the overt search for spiritual meaning has never been more intense than it is now'*

Spinks suggests that what Drane says here, needs to be qualified; *First, that there are differences across the globe and across religions. While urbanization seems to go hand in hand with religious decline, clearly Islamic cities however westernised, still give the appearance of a solid monolithic Islamic spirituality that is alive and well. In Africa and South America, Christianity is expanding rapidly. This contrasts with Europe, where religion is in retreat; however, in spite of all the talk of separation between church and state, the USA remains quite religious, though here too has been a decline since the 1960's. Yet, so many sociologists argue, if organised religion seems in decline, interest in spirituality is a growth industry. But here as Bryan Spinks suggests 'care has to be taken as to what the term 'Spirituality actually means' ¹.*

According to various social network sites including popular dating sites (so I'm told!); it seems that people like to define themselves as being '*spiritual but not religious*'. Here one might make the assumption that, whilst they may not have any affiliation to organised religion, or even a belief in God, many people have an awareness of a sense of 'otherness' something other than the physical or material.

In our post-modern age where values are more and more based on consumerism and choice, one would think that society should be more open to faith claims, but the paradox is, that according to studies, society has inherited

the anti-religious bias of modernity, and so in theory although people should be more open to religion, many do not have the knowledge or the experience to be more open to spirituality and faith².

A recent UK study suggests that belief in God (amongst young people) is an optional matter, a consumer choice. If it works fine, if not, drop it³.

For Christians, Spirituality is growing through prayer into a deeper relationship with God and each other through Christ. It is by his incarnation in taking on the fullness of humanity, that he understands us at the point of our deepest need. For me, the humanity of Jesus is nowhere more fully revealed than in his passion in the garden on the Mount of Olives (Matt.26.36-46, Mark 14.32-42, Luke 22. 39.-45). He knew that his death would carry the full horror of darkness and God-forsakenness, though quite what that was, we don't know.

But we do know however, that at that moment Jesus was afraid. So afraid in fact, *'his sweat became like drops of blood'* (Luke 22.44), something that medical research tells us is possible under conditions of extreme stress. Jesus was fully aware that he was about to enter that darkness, that terror alone to fulfil his purpose in the world. We read how *'overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death'* Jesus *'fell with his face to the ground'* (Matt.26.38) praying on three separate occasions ; *'My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me, yet not as I will, but as you will'*(Matt.26.39).

As I have already said, we cannot imagine how Jesus, in his death and passion must have felt in those final hours, not only the physical agony, but the emotional agony, when for the first and only time he is separated from his father; *'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me'* (Matt 27.46). Matthew's gospel leaves us in no doubt that during these final hours Jesus' abandonment by the father he loved and obeyed; the one who had been delighted in him, was total. It wasn't that it just *'seemed'* that God had abandoned him and really he was carrying him through it all, it was total and absolute. The point of the cross is that there Jesus faced and took upon himself the 'sin' of the world; all that separates us from the love of God, *'giving his life as a ransom for many*

‘(Matt.20.28). Now what this actually means is beyond our fully understanding; ‘Why’, we can ask did this have to happen’?

But of course the death of Jesus is not the end of the story. The cross is the climax, but it only makes the sense it does, in the resurrection of the one who was crucified for us. Jesus who by his death and resurrection has reconciled us to God , now lives to intercede for us and graciously invites us into a personal and intimate relationship with him and the Father, asking us to trust in him, leaving our own cares and stresses at the foot of the cross (Matt. 11.28-30). And it is through prayer that we enter into that life transforming relationship where our journey into faith within the love of God knows no bounds.

¹Bryan D. Spinks. *The Worship Mall* (SPCK.2010)p.xix.xx.

² Sara Savage(et al). *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World view of 15-25 year-olds* (Church House Publishing.2006)pp5ff.

³Spinks (SPCK. 2010)p.xxii