

'Losing my religion':

**Richard Holloway, doubt and what might be left to believe in
A sermon preached by Nick Moir on Sunday 23 September 2012**

*A little aside from the main road,
becalmed in a last-century greyness,
there is the chapel, ugly, without the appeal
to the tourist to stop his car
and visit it. The traffic goes by,
and the river goes by, and quick shadows
of clouds, too, and the chapel settles
a little deeper into the grass.*

*But here once on an evening like this,
in the darkness that was about
his hearers, a preacher caught fire
and burned steadily before them
with a strange light, so that they saw
the splendour of the barren mountains
about them and sang their amens
fiercely, narrow but saved
in a way that men are not now.*

R S Thomas, the poet, was an Anglican priest. He found what the chapel did a little frightening – 'they sang their amens fiercely' and their theology and outlook 'narrow', but this poem is an elegy to something that has been lost. Narrow they may have been but they were also 'saved in a way that men are not now'.

We had our holiday in Wales and at the end of the lovely Ffestiniog railway we went down a slate mine. They still dig slate out of the hills there but in open quarries, not mines - they would be too grim for modern sensibilities. 150 years ago boys went down those mines from the age of 11 for twelve hours a day, their only light being from candles and with thirty minutes in the middle of the day for their lunch break: 15 minutes to eat their sandwiches and 15 minutes the mine owners set aside for thinking time, when the miners met in little groups to talk about faith or politics or topical issues of the day. In the world above it was the chapel that was the hearth of the community where they went to warn themselves in meetings during the week and three times on Sundays. People nowadays are not sure whether to be more aghast at the way they spent their Sundays or their working days – both seem grim and grey to modern taste. But perhaps we do not see what they saw, and perhaps they are not to be as pitied as much as we might think. It is possible even that they had soul in a way which we do not, and perhaps they would even pity us. For them it was the sermon – where the 'preacher caught fire and burned before them with a strange light, so that they saw the splendour of the barren mountains about them and sang their amens.' They may have sung them fiercely, they may have been narrow, but perhaps they were, as Thomas puts it, 'saved in a way that men are not now'.

But maybe it was that narrowness that put us off.

It certainly put off as eminent a Christian as the sometime Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway. He resigned as bishop and Primus of the Episcopal Church in Scotland in the year 2000. He had become increasingly disillusioned with an organised religion that seemed suffocatingly narrow and was particularly distressed at the church's attitude to homosexual people. The worldwide Lambeth Conference of 1998 was a watershed. It wasn't just the very conservative resolutions that he didn't like. 'It was the tone of the debate that did the real damage,' he wrote. At a gathering of

Archbishops a few months later at Windsor he found himself on a toilet break side by side with the Archbishop of South-East Asia who accused him of filling Hell with homosexuals because, he wrote, 'I was giving them permission to commit a sin that damned them to eternal punishment, since no Sodomite could enter the kingdom of Heaven. I resisted the impulse to deck him and left him to go on passing his wormwood and gall into the Queen's urinal.' [Except he didn't say 'passing'...]

In his memoir *Leaving Alexandria* he describes what was going through his mind when he resigned.

I could no longer talk about God. I felt glutted with the verbal promiscuity of religion and the absolute confidence with which it talked about what was beyond our knowing. The irony was that in one of Paul's great poems, God chose to empty himself of language and become a life. But along comes Christianity and turns it back into words, trillions of them... reducing the mystery of what is beyond all utterance to chatter. I told them I had come to mind religious over-confidence more than I minded its atheistic opposite... religious language had ceased to be able to convey the mystery of the possibility of God for me because it confidently claimed to make present that which I experienced as absence....

I thought I should talk about Richard Holloway because a number of you will have read of him or heard him speak. He presented a whole series of Radio 4 programmes a few months ago entitled *Honest Doubt*. It may have made you wonder whether he is right. Perhaps we should abandon the certainties of creeds and organised religion, perhaps the words have lost their power and meaning. Perhaps there's more truth, more wisdom – or at least less narrow dogmatism – in agnosticism or atheism.

I can certainly see the attraction. I was visited by a very sure-of-herself Christian this week. She wanted to put me right about something – about which she had a point – but I found myself more and more irritated, even offended, by her blasted certainty about absolutely everything. And then she left me some literature to ensure that even if she hadn't managed to put me right then there would be another chance to reform my thinking. I looked up the publisher and saw that it came from a stable – premillennialism, I think, for those who understand these things – that had a very carefully defined statement of faith designed to differentiate itself from another form of fundamentalism that believed something much the same but different enough to make it a heresy. It's the narrowness that gets me and it thinks it's biblical, but theirs is not the only way of reading the bible. And listen again to these words from our New Testament reading:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

I think I can understand why Richard Holloway has gone the way he has, not least because I have read a number of his books and learnt a lot from them, if not always agreeing with him. He was actually the principal speaker at a university event I organised and I got to know him a little. I could sense even then that he was wrestling with things inside. I respect his integrity and his journey of faith and doubt, but it's not the same as mine. Yes, there are those who lose their faith and that can be deeply painful for them. I nearly lost my faith whilst at theological college – I haven't got time this morning to go through the ins and outs of that but what helped me was not to be argued back into faith. The one or two people who really helped me did so by showing that they weren't shocked by my questionings but had a faith themselves that had been tested by raw experience and was deep, quiet, unassuming and wise – 'gentleness born of wisdom'. I came to learn that what worked for me was neither a faith that was certain about all the details nor a doubting faith that didn't seem to believe very much at all (and I'd seen many examples of that in the Church of England too). No, what I came to value was a faith that was so rooted in the deep, deep love of God that it had no fear

of asking questions or rethinking attitudes or discovering wisdom in many other traditions. And, yes, there are plenty of examples in the church, past and present, of faith that is narrow, brittle, intolerant and even cruel, but every now and then you meet the real thing, a Christlikeness that reminds you of the Christ who inspired it and who still inspires it, the Christ who took a child in his arms and said if you welcome one such as this you welcome me, the Christ who constantly calls us back to the future, to rediscover what childhood is there to teach us, and that that is the only way to grow up. The Christian belief that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world' is not first and foremost a dogma or a programme of action but a wisdom. May that wisdom draw us into a faith that is 'pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy' that we may warm ourselves around that fire and faith, even that the fire would catch alight in us that we may see the splendour of the barren fens, no mountains here, and sing our amens not fiercely, neither feebly as I fear we often do, but sweetly and fulsomely.