

An Anglican theologian responds

Knowing How to Recognize God

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These are hard times for the Church in the West. Not only are historical churches all in decline, but it is extremely uncertain that those churches which are growing, mostly Pentecostal or Charismatic in nature, will ever reach beyond a limited number of the population. They are simply too specific in their worship styles and the spirituality they offer to satisfy everyone, however exciting these may be for some who are attracted to a particular sort of exuberance and sense of divine power. This is not to decry the gifts present in these or in any of the churches. But the European world looks at the churches, in general, with distaste and disdain. They all seem to be pedaling an unscientific mythology and a dubious, if not outrightly dangerous, morality which is, at best, irrelevant to human life and to human flourishing. To say nothing of the genuine abuses that happen within all the churches, historic or more recent...

It is into this dark situation that Piero Coda's article speaks, albeit addressing primarily a culture that is Italian and Catholic. The culture of a country like England, in the north of Europe (whatever Brexit may wish to suggest!) and with a highly pluriform ecclesiastical life (for all the predominance of the Church of England), is still sufficiently similar for Coda's words to resonate. Perhaps an echo thrown back from this different culture can serve to enlarge some of the meaning of what he says.

No problem is solved and no challenge is overcome by ignoring it. We have first of all to look clearly at the many faces of the tragedy facing the churches. For this glance to be fruitful, however, it is not enough to look with an untrained eye. Crucial here is the eye of the "hidden wound" of Jesus Forsaken, "the pupil of God's eye on the world", "the window of God opened out on to the world and the window of humanity through which one can see God", as Coda says quoting Chiara Lubich. For this eye is creative: it brings a transformation to what it sees. The perceiving the presence of God in all that is not God, in

seeing the Word incarnate who takes on himself all that is contrary to himself, is welcoming him. In that welcome a new world already begins: God is tasted and comes into the beholder and the first step leading away from the ugliness of whatever opposes God is taken. The resurrection within the historical context of the present begins at this point.

The five wounds that Coda, following Rosmini, focuses upon reveal different facets of the resurrection offered to Western culture. They are all to be found at the interface of the Church with the world. This is not because of any self-referential ecclesiasticism, but because the Church, seen by Coda, is the Church in its true being, in the plan God has for it: a sign, foretaste and instrument of the Kingdom. That is to say, the Church is where the resurrection becomes an experience in history here and now. This is, in effect, in other words, to repeat that the Church, when it is itself (and this goes for all of the churches), is the gospel lived.

In essence this is the remedy for the obscured gospel that cannot be heard by the world today, for the privatized religion and ghettoed defensiveness that tempts Christians, for the lack of inclusiveness (and not just of women) that mars the face of the beautiful bride of Christ, for ecclesial cultures that breed damaged structures whether they be of clericalism, party rivalry, unbalanced organization (or other issues depending upon the church concerned), and for a deep spiritual malaise of a lack of enthusiasm for mission, which is nothing less than a lack of love. A renewal of gospel life, made possible by a conversion to Jesus Forsaken, is the greatest gift that the churches could offer to the world. For this would mean offering the world the chance of transformation.

All the churches are, of course, called to live this out. It is implicit in being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Each of the churches has to take the message of constant renewal to heart in its own way and in its own context. Of course, that implies also healing the divisions among Christians: what mission can there be while Christians are not reconciled? But there is a deep joy to be found in the fact that, as all grow in gospel life and work together for the transformation of the world, so too will they all grow together. Shared mission is another path to unity.