

**SERMON: "LOOKING AT LIFE"**

by Geoffrey R Usher

*"What doth the Lord require of thee, O man, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah)*

I suspect that most people pause now and then to look at life. And I suspect that at least some people think that, on the whole, life is pretty grim.

Of course, life has been a pretty grim affair for millions of people for countless years before the twentieth century and into this twenty-first century. The big difference was that life used to be pretty grim at the local level.

People endured hardship, or knew others who were going through difficulties, in their own village or town. They were not aware of what was happening in other parts of the country, let alone in countries around the world - except from the stories and reports brought back by the few who had travelled beyond the local area or beyond the shores.

With the development of mass media of communication during the 20th century and into the 21st century, especially things like satellite television in recent years, people have become much more immediately aware of world events as they happen. Open a newspaper. Switch on your television set. The victims of conflict, of terrorism, of oppression, of famine, of corruption, of natural disasters - in Bosnia, in China, in South Africa, in Northern Ireland, in Mexico, in Australia, in Chile, in the Middle East, in London .

All of them lie on our breakfast table newspaper, or trudge forlornly into our living room. We usually don't know their names, but the millions of starving, ill, desperate and dying are part of our lives, part of our daily awareness. In fact, I suspect that many of us know more about what has happened in Bosnia, or Sarajevo, or Somalia, or Indonesia, than we do about what is happening in Albany, or Brisbane, or Broome, or Devonport, or Wilcannia.

In that sense, we have become much more world-minded (not to be confused with worldly-minded); although we are still inclined to

view the world from our own perspective, from our own nationalistic point of view.

And the words!

Millions of words, in print and on the air. All the rights and wrongs, the arguments for and against, the claims and counter-claims, the moral / material / ethical / political preaching, posturing, and persuasion; the reason, the ranting, and the rhetoric. The endless information and commentary about issues and ideologies.

It would be foolish for anyone to try to deal adequately with **all** the issues which confront us daily. The problem is that each issue is important in its own way. Each issue impinges on our lives, directly or indirectly.

Every charitable organisation that deserves support deserves **our** support. But we cannot respond to every one. We must make a choice. Our choice will be made according to various factors and influences: our personal interests or experiences; our family's background; the experiences of our neighbours and friends; the emotional impact of a newspaper article or a television programme; the state of our bank account at the time.

And our choices will be different from each other's, and from our neighbours' choices, because each of us will have different factors and influences in mind.

The important thing is not so much which organisations we choose to support, but rather that we do choose to support, and do in fact give our support.

What doth the Lord require of thee, but to **do** justly. .

Many churches use creeds as a test of membership - even as a test of religion. Once upon a time - and not so very long ago - people

who denied those creeds had their bodies burned for the good of their souls, or were eliminated to prevent the spread of the dangerous cancer of their "false" religion. For some churches / denominations, the test of religion is simple: "Is it found in the Bible?"

Such tests of religion are open to question. Some who failed the test of creed in the Middle Ages have belatedly been honoured, even canonised, by the Church that executed them.

The test of "The Book" depends on how the scripture is interpreted - and just which bit of scripture is being used.

Creed and Book are important. Religion is a way of life, an attitude to reality, which enshrines values and urges people to good; which means having beliefs about what is good, deciding on the principles and guidelines by which one is going to try to live.

Religion is what guides and impels us when we seek to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

It is natural enough to try to formulate our beliefs. But in the Dark Ages the Christian Church hardened against the threat of invading barbarians, and its creeds became fixed. Yet those creeds, and the beliefs which they expressed, were originally formulated out of human experience, to meet human religious needs.

The Christian scriptures are a repository of religious wisdom and insight, seeking to answer problems to meet human needs. As such, they have been rightly valued. But when the Bible came to be regarded as complete, unalterable and infallible, then the human needs often became obscured.

Heretics - those who fail the tests of book or creed - are not burned at the stake in our society today. But many people still want to define or test religion by Book or Creed. In doing so they lose sight of the human needs which gave rise to books and creeds - and which give rise today to the desire for new books and revised creeds. The real test of religion is grounded in human need. Not in philosophical speculation or academic semantics, but in the simple question: Does it help people?

Religion is for people. Religion arises out of people's needs, problems, questions, experiences. Religion cannot exist by itself; it exists only where there are people.

Book and Creed have their value. But we must reach into them - and beyond them - to the human needs they seek to meet. As Unitarians, we have no fixed creeds, but we do have beliefs values, ideals. We only resist any fixed, legalistic formulation of them, especially formulations which other people (even other Unitarians) might want to impose on us.

And we welcome inspired scripture (whether Biblical or other), testing it by its ability to meet human needs, its ability to help us to understand life and the mystery of life.

What is that life? What are the human needs that our religion should meet? Among the generally accepted characteristics of living things (a tree or a baby) marking them off from non-living things (a table or a doll) are digestion, respiration, and reproduction.

Living things need food, sustenance for growth, for replacement of tissue, for energy to move, to keep warm, to stay alive.

Living things need help, such as breathing in oxygen, so that the chemistry of the body can function, food can be digested; so that they can survive.

And living things begin, are born; and they die; so, to perpetuate the species,

living things must reproduce.

These characteristics of living things are also needs. They need not only to digest food, but to find it; not only to breathe, but to have air to breathe; not only to reproduce, but (in animals, at least) to have mates with which to reproduce. Without such, living things perish, individually and collectively. "Man cannot live by bread alone." But we cannot live without bread. So, we seek not only bread for ourselves, but also bread for our neighbour. We seek to feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless, to clothe the naked.

To ignore another person's hunger indicates a poor religion. To this extent, the meeting of another's need is a test of religion.

Our religion is no true religion if, in following it, we ignore the needs of others; if we fail to do justly.

But religion is more than just doing good. Our religion should meet our own needs first - and then good is likely to flow from us naturally. Our religion's primary value lies in the meaning it gives to our lives, in the help it gives us to find inner resources for joy, whether our fortune be good or ill.

The dandelion seed, the caterpillar, and the young turtle are left to fend for themselves. When a bird hatches, it will die unless its parents tend it, feed it, and encourage it to fly. The brown bear cub is tended for two years before its mother sends it forth.

The human baby needs care and tending for much longer - being fed and taught to feed; being kept warm and sheltered; being taught to speak and to write, to develop means of communication and understanding; being protected from dangers of hurt or disease, and being shown how to avoid them; being guided in the complexities of communal living, in social education.

Those are complex needs, but they are essentially physical. More still is needed, to help children to understand their natural emotions, aspirations, curiosities, fears and ideals, and to find confidence in themselves. Children need love - that capacity which some claim is unique to human beings, but which certainly is necessary. Just as a kitten will instinctively chase a leaf before it later hunts mice, so the human has an instinctive need of love.

Prophets and peasants have always known that a child deprived of love is likely to grow up emotionally stunted, feeling inadequate, perhaps compensating by anti-social aggression or selfishness. An unloved child, however well provided for materially - a child who is treated as a thing rather than as a person - is more likely to grow up to treat other people as things to be used for his or her own ends. Children need love.

So do adults. Imagine being in complete solitary confinement: all your wants supplied by machine. All, that is, except human contact. No human voice. No human smile. No human love, no human touch or caress. No other person to show interest or to share your ideas or your life. No other person to love or be loved.

Love is a strange thing. Why should humans ever bother to feel for others? To yearn for the welfare of their children? To be concerned for friends? To suffer when calamity overtakes others? To share joys and misfortunes? To visit the sick and lonely, or tend to others' needs?

Micah provides the answer.

What doth the Lord require of us, but to do justly - to provide for others' physical needs, such as hunger - and to love mercy - to have compassion, to feel for and with other people.

Love is a strange thing, but it is as essential to human life as air, food, warmth, light, water. Not only do we need to be loved, but we need to love. Love makes the world go round - not only in the exhilaration of youthful infatuation, but also in everyday life.

If the real test of religion is grounded in human need, we need to ask: Does our religion teach us how to love, and does it help us to love?

Our religion's primary value lies in the meaning it gives to our lives, and in the help it gives us to find inner resources for joy, for love. Our religion will meet our need for serenity not by making the world peaceful (which is a by-product) but by enabling us to live peaceably in an unquiet world. Religion will help us to bring about a better world by first enabling us to discover the Kingdom of God in our own hearts.

Our religion will meet other needs: our need of confidence, the sense that we are not strangers lost in an alien land; our need to feel that we are not alone, but are part of a larger life, so that we become more tolerant and friendly in our relationships with others.

Religion brings humility to the proud, and builds up those who feel weak or afraid. Religion meets the needs of human life by opening our eyes to wonder, beauty, and daily miracle; by giving courage born of faith and by enriching all individual experience.

What does the Lord require of us, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

Book and Creed are not the real test; they are a product, a means. It is only when Book or Creed, religious services and acts of worship, communion, fellowship, spoken prayer, statement of faith or any other expression of religion, speaks to our inner need and condition - it is only then that the religion from which those

expressions spring will have passed the test.

Travers Herford regarded Unitarianism as comprising the essentials of personal religion, the close relationship of the human soul to God, the reality of prayer, the consecration of life to the service of God by doing his will and by loving one's fellow human beings. He said that there is no region of life where this religion could be lifted out as having nothing to say.

Not Book and Creed, but an attitude of mind: a progressive faith which answers people's needs and provides fresh ways of looking at life.

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