

The Reverend Father Robert Hampson

Fundamentals of Faith

Good afternoon everybody and thank you for the invitation to speak today. I have chosen this title, perhaps provocatively because I believe that the words we use very often become so well worn that they often cease to have any value. And a word like fundamental or fundamentalist may become so clichéd that they cease to have value. But there are other words as well, words like liberal, words like abuse, words like tolerance. What do we really mean by them? Now I come from quite a different stance from some of the speakers. One of the speakers introduced themselves as a humanist. I am a practicing and believing Christian. And in many respects that may put me on the conservative side. And so it is important for me to, as well as you, to underline what it is that are the fundamentals of faith. And I have got three.

Values I believe is the first one. They are things which we search for. And we don't discover them quickly. We have to search diligently to find them. And our faith and traditions assist us with that. They give us signposts of where to look. And if we are hardworking in that over time, over years, sometimes over decades, we come to things that are truly valuable. And if you read the scriptures of all our three traditions, I believe you find in there deep values about what is important in human life; about respect, about honesty, about integrity. Many other things too.

These values then enable us to face the world in a different way. They enable us to direct what we do to the world outside. That is number one. And I want to say this because I was recently in the land of Palestine, on the West Bank of Palestine, not in Israel, during the time when the cartoons of the prophet Mohammed came out, and it is easy for us in the Western perspective to say "Why can't people be tolerant?" But I can say to you, it wasn't only the Muslim community that were highly offended it was also the Christian community. I was there amidst a largely Christian village, and I can say without any doubt that the Christian people of that village were as horrified as the Muslim people and deeply offended. Something had been taken away from what was important to the Community of faith. Something had been under-valued. And where values exist, which are found after a long search the need to be upheld. And if we dismiss that for trite tolerance, we are in danger of taking away something very important for all of our humanity.

The second point; the second fundamental of faith I believe is the belief in God. And I want to come back to this in a minute because I think that it is absolutely central. But belief in God is essentially belief that our life is directed, and the scriptures, whichever one of the traditions we're in, but the scriptures show us the way of how God has directed the life of human beings. He comes in to their lives unexpectedly, and sometimes we don't even notice it for one hundred or two hundred or three hundred years. But we look back and we see the footprints. And we say yes, God was there, maybe in our own lives too. And at the time we think that it was a bad thing. And then, twenty years later, we realise that perhaps it was the greatest blessing of our time. And so we know, as believing people that God is present when we look back, we see the scriptures, we see the signs that is there. The time span of God is strangely not ours. He appears in a great way I reckon about every five hundred years. And when we want him to appear on our time span, we sometimes come to the conclusion that he is not present. That is number two.

Number three is transformation. That is a fundamental of faith. Transformation, that we change not only ourselves but the world around us. If we're imbued with a vision which the values give us which the signposts of our faith and traditions direct us to, then we ought to with that power, with those visions that the values give us, go out into society and make society a different place. Because if it doesn't happen that way, then what is faith for? Faith is to give us values. It's to show us where the footprints of God are. And it is to lead us to transform the society in which we live. They are the fundamentals of faith.

However, we live in a society which has largely progressed from faith. It has progressed from faith with the liberal values that have largely come out of the enlightenment. These are good values; the values which we have heard illicit, of Voltaire and John Locke, amongst many others. And you know that these values have opened up many vistas of humanity which were not present before they were hammered out in the last two or three hundred years.

Liberal society has benefits, but it also has choices. It offers us choices. A plethora, a forest of choices and it tells people that these choices are of equal value. But the religious person cannot accept that. Because when he has buried himself in the tradition for so long and searched for those values which have required years to find and to hone for the values useful to him in his life. He can't accept that any choice is valuable and all societies are equal. Liberal society also doesn't tell you what choices are best. You need something else for that. You need to find your values. Society's values perhaps, but ultimately God's values. We believe as Christians and Jews, I am sure that it is the same for Muslims, that we are made in the image of God. And that image is what guides us in our respect for the human subject. And we have to move forward in our search for what these important choices are.

And I want to move forward, because I want to look in a way at which these values, these beliefs in God, and the transformation can be turned around in a negative way. For a start, the person who doesn't search diligently; who doesn't stay within his or her tradition and look for those values and doesn't discover them and make them part of their life can often substitute instead a belief structure which is very rigid and very dogmatic and so instead of values, we have doctrines. And so that is wrong not because it is a value but because it's in a book in a particular place. So, that is one way in which we can go wrong.

On the second level, on the belief in God, and this is where perhaps our Brethren who perhaps want to force the hand of God are in danger of making a great mistake. That is when we don't really believe that God has got everything in his hands. We don't realise that God is working on a time span that is far greater than ours, and we try to jog things along a bit. These bombs and many other things really manifest a disbelief in God, an unfaith in God because they don't realise that God is there to use human beings for his purposes, not to have people in his name do things for him. It is dangerous to assume that we can take on the role of God. Vengeance is mine says the scripture.

And thirdly, instead of transformation religion can become insular. I don't know whether it is religion or anything. And one of the problems of liberal society is that we have become insular. We don't look out to see how we can transform society. The big models of transformation seem to have died in the West and 1989 and the coming down of Communism. Rather we keep looking inside and say:

"You do your thing, and I do my thing".

They are wrong as far as the fundamentals of faith are concerned. They don't work. They don't do anything. You need your values and you need your understanding of God and you need to look out to transform the world around you.

People, I believe who are being lost in a negative form of fundamentalism, and I will also add to that; a negative form of liberalism, have provided us with a great vacuum. I have many friends who will come under the category of fundamentalist. And I honour the fact that they have found values that are important. I honour the fact that they believe in God, and I honour the fact that they look for transformation. But I also look at liberal society and I say to myself: What is the future for us when we have no signposts like we used to have? When we don't create that deep search for truth and for values that the religious traditions provide?"

There is a vacuum. And I want to suggest that fundamentalism is filling that vacuum. It's coming in because there is nothing there.

Society needs I believe to re-find its religious values and to re-find its religious traditions and to revalue those and to find in them what is good and wholesome. It's not going to happen when we merely talk about tolerance in a way which is dismissive of those values and how precious they are.

Going back to my time in Palestine, and the way in which the insult to the prophet Mohammed and Muslim people was felt not only by the Muslim community but also by the Christian community and I am sure by other communities as well.

There are some things that have to be put on a different scale. It is not just allowing everyone to believe about everything that they want. It's for a common search. That's what is important, a search that allows us to go in a direction together and find that God is working in our traditions.

Belief in God means that essentially at some stage in life God's going to sort out the mess. We are not going to achieve that. We allow God to work. We have faith in him. And we don't go around blowing ourselves up. But what we do need, I believe, we do need to listen to their concerns and to the traditions and the values that these communities have. Take those values away and I don't think we have anything left in our modern society.

Thank you.