

May Book Review Continued

C is for Children and Schools

When the Christian story is little known, it comes with a freshness denied to those of us who have grown up with it and feel that we are on first-name terms with the Prodigal Son and even the fatted calf. God's story has real power.

Children have a natural sense of the spiritual. Adults are often amazed at how responsive even young children can be when given a period of silence in a school assembly. Watch a small child be captivated by the color and shape of a pile of stones on the beach, while the adults are running in and out of the water and leaping on to surfboards. Not for nothing did Wordsworth write, 'Trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home.' The trouble lies in what happens next. A child was overheard whispering to his baby brother, 'Tell me what God feels like. I'm starting to forget.' But when they're young, children have open hearts.

D is for Death and bereavement

The Cross: God knows; he's been there. God is here; he loves you. These are the simple, profound, healing truths at the heart of the cross. We offer them with humility and care but with confidence for they carry their own conviction.

E is for Evangelism

One thing we must always remember, however, is that numbers on their own can never be the success criterion of a faith centered on a man who was crucified. At the heart of the Christian faith is a cross, a sign of pain, humiliation and failure.

We do well to remember the words of Bonhoeffer that 'when Jesus calls a man to follow him, he bids him come and die'. The invitation we make in evangelism isn't to a trouble-free fun run through life, but to the serious and infinitely rewarding experience of following Jesus, both crucified and risen. We would love more people to share that experience with us, but not in an uninformed way that doesn't reckon with the cost of doing so.

J is for Jesus

Christianity is not about the trivia of our lives; it's about their ultimate purpose. Either what it claims touches our very center and profoundly changes the way we see everything – or it is a comforting but ultimately irrelevant story that changes nothing. For if God was not in Christ and our faith is a delusion, then we are born into a chancy and precarious universe with no ultimate purpose or destiny. But if Christ was in very truth the window onto God then we are held in being in our lives and through our deaths by that loving, creative Spirit whom he taught us to call Father, and who has created us to know and love him, even as we are loved and known.

L is for Leadership

God must fill our vision If we don't have the compelling mystery of God as our number one obsession, then why should anyone else be bothered? God is our constant point of reference, the One with whom we begin and end every day, and in whose sight we are perennially loved. We have to face the danger that in our role as leaders we can become so caught up with the things of God, the paraphernalia of religion, that we lose the divine enchantment of our faith. If we don't sustain the sacred center of our lives, we could become perfectly competent religious functionaries, but not much more.

N is for Narrative

Narrative

The urgency of telling God's story lies in the fact that as a culture we have largely forgotten it. The art historian Neil MacGregor puts the point well: 'In a sense, we are a very unusual society. We are trying to do something that no society has really done. We are trying to live without an agreed narrative of our communal place in the cosmos and in time.' The Christian gospel has given Western culture that 'holding narrative' for centuries, but now it is either deliberately denied or carelessly forgotten. We have to keep telling God's story and the stories within God's story because, in religious terms, our culture is functionally illiterate.

W is for Worship

Tom Wright says that the most common Greek word for worship in the Bible is *proskuneo*, which means, in some formulations, 'to come forward to kiss'. Lovely. Worship isn't actually what we do at 10 a.m. on Sunday. It's how we live before God all week. It's an orientation of our whole life towards God. Sunday morning just gives us that experience in a more focused and concentrated way.