

Culture and Counter Culture; some thoughts after SSF 040504

This is both to say thanks to Philippa, Rachel, Neil and Liz for this morning, and to point a guilt-inducing finger at the four of you, you are guilty of making me think....and then write. Your due punishment, then, is to receive these thoughts..!

I struggle with the idea of how Christians should relate to current culture, and a few months ago had a lengthy series of e-mail exchanges with an American (Dan Lucarni) who had written a book ('Confessions of an ex-Worship Leader') who had decided that culture was just too worldly for us to cope with back, and that we should pull back from worldly musical styles etc. I disagreed with him on quite a few issues, but could empathise with his problems. Anyway, you have set those particular cogs turning all over again.

We cannot help but be part of culture, unless we all become hermits and totally unplug from society. Some fundamentalist Christians more or less try to do that, but I don't think it ever really works. As soon as you draw a line, build a curtain wall around yourself, you find versions of the things you tried to keep out are there inside your defences. So what do we do?

Rachel, talking about people like Christine Aguilera? (whom I have no great knowledge of, other than to think that the poor girl must get cold if she is always dressed like that) said she was controversial, but you would not condemn her, because she had the guts to get up there and do her own thing (that is a rough paraphrase of what I recall you saying, forgive me if I got it wrong). Two thoughts spring to mind:

- 1) For someone to have the courage of convictions, and stand up and speak (or sing them out) is in itself a good thing.

But then there comes a but...

- 1) It all depends what those convictions are. A young Austrian with strong feelings and a real gift of the gab began getting up on stages and expressing himself in the 1920s; he became quite a superstar. He was called Adolf...

We have that difficult job of not pointing the finger to condemn (that is not our job, Jesus said he did not come into the world to condemn it)- but at the same time being wise (wise as slithery hissy things, which had not had a very good press in Scripture until then) to judge, to discern, to weigh. So what are people saying, are they affirming something good, or advocating behaviour which is not?

And a further point. A lot of the people who are on stage and say/sing controversial or shocking things are not necessarily expressing a deeply-felt personal sentiment. They are doing it because, behind the scenes, some uncool middle-aged man at a desk is using them as a money-making device. There is an ancient human tradition of males exploiting female sexuality for their own financial gain, it comes in all sorts of forms. There are always some people who will pay money to be shocked and scandalised, and, lets face it, there is not very much left one can do to shock and scandalise people, the field has been terribly narrowed over the last century. Once exposing an ankle could have been a moneyspinner... We are not going to stop this, but we do need to be aware of it.

This is all pointing out the bad side, and I think it is something we need to do. But then to say that the contemporary music scene is so worldly that as Christians we should just reject the lot (as Dan thought) does not work. Because, like it or not, we are brought up with it, it is all round, it is in the air we breathe, and in the air waves that resonate within our ear drums (and I think this is THE big difference between us and previous generations. In the 18th and 19th century there were what we would now term folk songs with lyrics as sexually explicit as anything in the charts today, but they would have been sung by a bunch of blokes carousing in an alehouse, not beamed into every home in the realm). And there is no doubt that God can and does use the music; I can think of an occasion where a U2 track, playing as I drove, has reduced the barrier between the eternal and the temporal to almost total transparency, for a moment, for me. That WWMT track you played was pretty good as well, God came though loud and clear on that one.

Something else to be borne in mind. The cool and the uncool. Something 'cool', ie the desire to go clubbing, may be a driving life-force for 80% of teenage-kind (and Liz); but remember, there are always those of us, equally within the Kingdom as you, whom it does not touch. When I was in my early and mid teens the Beatles were laying the nation to waste; however, my main interest was in medieval monastic architecture. There may well be similar teenaged persons around today (well, perhaps....); you cannot make us un-persons. Cool is for

some, not all. God is for everyone.

So how do we handle the whole thing. We cannot make the church 'cool' in the world's sense. People sometimes try to. I read this week of a church in America (where else) that had dance/rave services where participants got high on 'entheogens'; these are apparently a class of drugs which affect the parts of the brain that are (so neuroscientists tell us) involved in religious experience. No longer do we need a preacher, or an anointed worship leader; now chemicals can do it for us. Are we going to try this at Stepping Stones? (Calls to mind the typing error Stepping Stoned).

This is probably the sort of issue we are going to have to face in the future. Stepping Stones is a fellowship produced by a reaction against a church that wanted to draw lots of hard-and-fast lines, but in the end, in an increasingly fluid world, I guess we will have to do some line-drawing ourselves. And maybe we need to do some talking about how we handle contemporary culture and its mores, what is being said in those lyrics I found so hard to hear this morning, and how we should respond to them. We need discernment, wisdom, courage, please! And now about getting together to talk about them? In an ideal world all of us who were there this morning could have ended up somewhere this evening somewhere comfortable, over coffee, talking (and listening), debating, expressing our opinions and learning from each others.

Anyone else in for that?