

FAKES!

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Matthew 7: 15-29.

People were shocked at the attempt, on November 14th, to detonate a bomb in Liverpool. Then, on Tuesday November 16th, several newspapers carried the virtually identical headline saying the suicide bomber was a Christian convert. We might ask how this could be thought possible that someone planning this murderous attack could be thought to be a Christian.

1. Changed lives.

The passage we are looking at comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon contrasts the true faith with fake versions of it that had been handed down to the people. Our Lord therefore brings warnings to us as to what fake religion looks like, while contrasting it with the true. True Christianity involves changed lives along the lines described in Scripture. We can see some of the characteristics of it in the passages nearby to the one we are looking at today. We are to be non-judgmental (Matthew 7:1-5). We are to be prayerful (Matthew 7:7-12). We are to be persevering (Matthew 7:13-14). We are to be fruit-bearing (Matthew 7:15-20). At the end we are faced up with the choices we are making (Matthew 7:24-27), either to serve God and do His will, or not.

Then in Matthew 7: 21-23 we have warnings about self-deception. We can be good at using religious words and saying 'Lord, Lord', but pious words are not enough. We can even do powerful works, but these are not enough either. Judas Iscariot did many works and was still a fake. These people can still be regarded by the Lord as lawless because there was no changed life, no change of heart.

2. The ill-equipped church.

The church is not particularly good at spotting fakes. It lacks discernment. Today there are still plenty of words and plenty of works, but people can be fooled by these things and fail to look and see if there has been a change of heart. Some of us have left behind churches and people who have not shown any ability to recognize what is fake or to diagnose who they were and what they were doing.

Emad al-Swealmeen had done the Alpha Course at Liverpool Cathedral and been confirmed in March 2017. He had stayed with a Christian family and seemed very devout. Then he disappeared from the Cathedral, and they lost contact with him. Later

he re-surfaced as the suicide bomber on November 14th. And the newspapers reported that he was a convert to Christianity – although that theme was later dropped when it was found out subsequently that he had been diligently attending the mosque prior to trying to kill people. The media had shown themselves to be out of their depth in trying to understand who a true Christian is and what behaviour to expect from them. Some sections of the media seemed to be positively gleeful that a ‘Christian’ could be found doing extremist things, and not just Muslims.

But it also revealed that the church is also out of its depth in trying to understand who a true Christian is and what we should expect. It was known that some asylum-seekers were advised to fake being a Christian so as to make the case that, as a convert to Christianity, they would be persecuted on their return home. Some church leaders wrote in the newspapers at the time about the failure of churches to properly inquire into whether the person is genuine or not.

It also highlighted the Alpha Course, and we might ask questions about whether it is an adequate tool for evangelism or really asks searching enough questions. It gives too little truth and expects too little change in the person professing conversion. It has an insufficient understanding of conversion. It would be only too easy for something like speaking in tongues, or raising one’s hands in worship, or attending meetings to be taken as reliable indicators of true conversion when really these things prove nothing of the sort. The churches have lost (if indeed some of them ever had it) the meaning of what a Christian is; what Christian conversion is; and how the Holy Spirit works.

Do we look at ourselves ever and wonder at our lack of progress? Has our life really changed? Are we following a different path now to what we were following before? We might denounce particular things, but do we then permit ourselves pride, lust, anger and judgmentalism?

3. Test yourself.

It is important that we are not self-deceived. To sing hymns, to attend church, to give money to different causes are not sufficient proof. We must be ever forsaking sin and trusting Christ more and more for salvation. We should be holding fast to the belief in the after-life, of judgment to come, and be ever finding hope in Christ’s death and resurrection. We should always be finding out more exactly what pleases God, having the Bible as our law and our authority. We should desire to pray more and be happy that evangelism is taking place. We should be unhappy with who we are but very happy with who He is. We should be unhappy with what we are doing but happy with what He is doing.

Progress for us is to be leaving behind bad behaviour, bad ideas, and bad theology. If people say of us that we have changed, then that is a good testimony.