

Was St Paul 'Woke'?

Robinson 14/5/23

'It all depends on what you mean by...'. One or two of the older ones among you will remember these words being used by the philosopher C.E.M. Joad in response to every question he was asked on the BBC's weekly radio 'Brains Trust'. Was St Paul 'woke'? It all depends on what you mean by....

The word 'woke' is of course originally the simple past tense of the verb 'to wake': I/he/she/they woke. But it is a verb that has long been used in a metaphorical sense meaning 'to be aware', and recent usage of the word has turned it into an adjective to describe what one is – or claims – to be. It was again courtesy of the BBC that I was introduced a few weeks' ago to the book *Woke: the Journey of a Word* by Matthew Syed, who surprised me by beginning his journey exploring this metaphorical use of the verb by quoting words in a letter attributed to St Paul: 'Awake! Rise from the dead'.¹ We heard another example of this metaphorical use of the verb in our reading from 1 Thessalonians,² where in a glorious mixed metaphor Paul urges his readers to keep awake, because the *Day* of the Lord comes like a thief in the *night*.

But St Paul was by no means the first to use the word in this way, for the Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself had done the same. Why this warning to be awake, aware? For them, it was because the Day of Judgement was at hand, and one must not be caught napping. To be awake or aware meant being prepared for what was coming.

When you enter the examination hall you need to be more than *physically* awake; you need to know something about your subject – to be *aware* of the issues about which you are going to write. And on the Day of Judgement the Chief Examiner is the God of righteousness, who asks not about what we know, but about how we have *behaved*. Paul summed up Christian discipleship as being ‘in Christ’ – and that meant, very simply, being *like* him. In his home town of Nazareth, Jesus declared that he had been sent to declare good news to the poor, to announce release for prisoners, sight for the blind, and healing for victims of sickness and abuse.³ Have those who claim to be followers of Jesus been faithful to his mission? Have *we* done what Jesus would have done? Have we acted justly? Have we endeavoured to create a fair and equal society? It is no wonder that St Paul urges the Thessalonians to keep awake, to keep sober, armed with the familiar triad of faithfulness, hope and love, and to act with compassion for others.

The one thing that everyone knows about St Paul – or thinks they know – is that he was ‘converted’ on the Damascus Road. He certainly underwent a radical change of mind. The pre-Christian Paul had been a fervent Jew – a member of the exclusive sect of the Pharisees, a word that meant ‘separated’. Pharisees were – in their own eyes – the *crème de la crème*. They faithfully obeyed every jot and tittle of the Law. As members of the chosen people, they regarded God as *their* God. Non-Jews didn’t count in the scheme of things – and neither did non-observant Jews.

On the Damascus Road, Paul discovered that his understanding of God had been distorted – that God loved Gentiles as well as Jews, sinners as well as the upright, outsiders as much as those who had always thought of

themselves as belonging. His theology changed from being exclusive to being inclusive, from being divisive to being cohesive. One of his most remarkable statements is found in Galatians, possibly his earliest letter: in the Christian community, he writes, there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, no such thing as slave and free, no such thing as male and female. Contrast this with his previous beliefs, which are mirrored in an ancient Jewish prayer in which a pious Jew gives thanks that he has been born Jewish, not Gentile, free not enslaved, male not female. Paul cheerfully smashes through the barriers of the ancient world – the barriers that excluded everyone except the elite from privilege and status: You are *all* ‘sons of God’ he declares – and before you take offence at his ‘sexist’ language, remember that it was *sons* who had all the privileges and status in the ancient world. The Christian community should be a community of *inclusion* and equality. Wake up! Welcome one another!

‘But hang on,’ some of you may say, ‘didn’t Paul instruct women to cover their heads in worship? He did indeed, though at the same time he reminded the men that they must *not* cover their heads! In doing so, he was following the social conventions of the day, and in the ancient world *respectable* women were expected to cover their heads in public; Christians should take care not to bring the Church into disrepute. What is truly remarkable is that Paul is assuming here that women are praying and prophesying – in other words, leading public worship, something that was impossible in the ancient synagogue – and that elsewhere he refers to them as partners in the Gospel, deacons, even apostles. A friend of mine once gave a lecture in which he argued that St Paul should have been made the patron saint of what was then called ‘women’s lib.’ He was surely right. For Paul, as for Jesus, the Gospel meant freedom, liberation, for all who

were 'outsiders' – Gentiles, slaves, women.... Wake up! Receive and honour others – whoever they are – as you would wish them to receive and honour you.

For Paul, the call to be awake is a call to be faithful to a gospel which had broken down the barriers of race, status, and sex, and established a society in which discrimination had been banished and all were equal. It is hardly surprising, then, that the modern idea of being 'woke' had its roots in the nineteenth century North American community of former slaves, struggling to find justice in an unjust society. The call to 'stay woke' was picked up by civil rights activists who dreamed of racial equality. Clearly 'dreaming' did not mean sleeping! For Martin Luther King, who famously spoke of his own dream for the future, it meant 'remaining awake'. Be awake – be aware of the injustices suffered by so many; and that meant that the need to be 'woke' needed to be heard, not just by the *victims* of oppression, but by those who – often unknowingly – were themselves the perpetrators.

It is easy to see, too, how the call to be 'woke' became infused with political anger, until in the last few years it has become a word used by some minority groups to demand what they see as their rights at the expense of others, while many regard it as a word that indicates angry, extremist protest. Identification of oneself as 'woke' has become aggressive and militant, and so naturally evokes hostility. Its association with identity politics has paradoxically led to the suppression of free speech, and it has been labelled as 'political correctness gone haywire'. A word originally associated with a Gospel that offered inclusion and equality is now proving divisive and causing bitterness. Are *you* 'woke'? Well, it all

depends on what you mean by the word: a call for social justice or an invitation to indulge in extremist *anti*-social behaviour.

What does Paul's call to be awake mean for the way *we* live our lives? Has the Christian community lived up to Paul's vision? Sadly, the answer to that question is 'no'. The Church soon succumbed to the divisions and privileges of the society around it. This was true in Paul's own time, for we find him writing to the Corinthians rebuking them for the divisions among them; they were apparently indulging in a slanging match in which each boasted of their own spiritual gifts: I've been given the gift of teaching, or the gift of healing, so I'm further up the pecking order of God's favourites than you are; social divisions continued, so that the poor arrived at a common meal to find that the best places – and the best food – had been commandeered by the wealthy; the poor and the slaves were seated 'below the salt' and ate the leftovers. No, says Paul, the greatest spiritual gift is offered to all, and that is the gift of love, which honours and assists others, and binds the community together. In the kingdom of Christ, all are equal, all are one. Wake up!

History offers us a depressing story of how men and women, Christians as well as non-believers, ignored his words. From our twenty-first century advantage point we look back and condemn the ways in which past societies lived. We condemn the racism and sexism that denied the majority of the human race to a subservient life; we condemn the privilege and hierarchy which honoured the few and deprived the many of opportunities. The Church was frequently as guilty as the state; so, too, our Universities. Joining Robinson nearly fifty years ago, in a University that still excluded so many, the first Fellows endeavoured to found a society in

which it no longer mattered where one had been educated, whether one was black or white, male or female.

It is easy to deplore the mistakes of the past, and to suggest reparations for the sins of our predecessors. But that can divert our attention from what is going on today, and it is far *more* important that we should ourselves be ‘woke’ – aware of the injustices of the present and our own involvement in them, and prepared to tackle them. The need to be ‘woke’ in a world where we hear daily of the horrors of human trafficking and slavery, wars and political imprisonments, murders and rape, prejudice and discrimination, is as great as ever. Be aware! For Paul, the inevitable implication of belief in a God of justice was that one must act to *bring* justice and peace. Welcome one another – outsiders as well as those in your own circle, he urged his readers; help one another; love one another. Was he ‘woke’? With a vision like this, how could he *not* be?

¹ Eph. 5:14

² 1 Thess. 5:6

³ Luke 4:14-21.