

‘If I were a wealthy man ... I would sit in the synagogue all day asking questions that would cross a rabbi’s eyes.’ (*Topol in ‘Fiddler on the Roof’*)

Earlier this week, at the CERN Laboratory in Geneva, the results of a series of experiments were carried out using the Large Hadron Collider. This is basically the biggest and most expensive bit of scientific apparatus ever built on earth. Located deep underground, a tunnel 25 km in diameter it is capable of producing beams of very high energy protons (the core of the hydrogen atom) which are then fired at each other and in the ensuing collisions producing conditions similar to what were believed to exist in the wake of the ‘Big Bang’ that is believed to mark the beginnings of our Universe.

As the results were announced in CERN the audience erupted into loud cheers as people spoke of it being one of the great moments in the history of science. They were announcing the discovery of a very short lived, highly elusive particle called the Higgs Boson. Why the excitement? – academic scientists are rarely given to huge demonstrations of excitement. The existence of this particle was first postulated by Philip Higgs, back in the 1960’s.. In the context of current theories of atomic structures, it explains why some atomic particles, such as the proton and electron, have mass and items such as the photon do not – in other words they weigh something.

I suspect that more than a few are asking, ‘So what?’ But if you think about it, if things did not weigh anything, then there is no gravity, nothing to hold things together and all there would be in the Universe would be huge amounts of energy flying around the place – nothing to hold your hymn book together,

nothing to hold the bricks in this Church together, nothing to hold you and me together, the earth, the planets, the sun.

There is something in man, in you and me that wants to ask questions. Questions, questions – we are always asking questions. That is one of the things that makes us human, that marks us out from other animals. We will go to huge lengths to answer those questions. Christopher Columbus set off in the search of unknown lands, some thinking he would fall off the edge of the world. If the earth is flat then why is the horizon curved? These questions why go far beyond the physical world in which we live; questions about right and wrong, questions about the meaning of life. Why? Why? Why?

That is what has Ezekiel on his knees in our first Lesson as he asks – why, what has God in mind for him, for the people God is calling him to speak to. In the second lesson on our Lesson sheet (which we did not read from today) Paul is struggling to come to terms with a weakness, his thorn in the flesh, that will not go away – and he asks ‘Why?’

I often think that one of the most valuable lessons we learn in school is that of beginning to ask ‘Why?’ In geography; why are mountains and valleys formed the way they are? In history; what were the events that shaped our society? In science: why does iron rust, how come a plane weighing a hundred tons is able to fly?

There is a whole range of other questions we must begin to learn to ask. Why do some people live in abject poverty and some do not? Is it right to pollute

the world, to waste resources, for children to work in terrible conditions in the Far East so that I can wear cheap clothes? Is it right for financiers in London to distort bank lending rates, earning bonuses for themselves while further undermining thousands of businesses? These were the sort of questions asked by Ezekiel and the other prophets of the Old Testament as they stood before Kings and in the public square and declared ‘Thus says the Lord .... this is wrong. Continue this way and your society will crumble.’

That is one of the functions of the Church in our own day, to continue in the tradition of the prophets of speaking truth to power. To ask the awkward questions; questions of justice, of truth as our society struggles with issues of morality, of prejudice, of justice.

I began with that line from ‘Fiddler on the Roof’, ‘If I were a wealthy man ... I would sit in the synagogue all day asking questions that would cross a rabbi’s eyes.’ To ask questions, to ask ‘Why?’ is as I have said one of the things that marks us out as human. It is something a child does quite spontaneously, something a teenager does that drives us almost to distraction. May we never grow too old to wonder at the splendour of this world in which we live or too complacent to question injustice, corruption and immorality in high places. And in all this to give thanks to God for the gift of a mind to ask that simple question ‘Why?’ that enables us to explore his wonderful creation and seek to understand his will and purpose for this world.