CULTURE IS WHAT YOU FIND IN A PETRI DISH

Posted on March 1, 2018 by Eddie

Culture isn't just about whether Beethoven is better than Ed Sheeran, it also covers why English people tend to refuse a biscuit to go with their tea until they are asked a second time.
Category: Observations

A few days ago, my friend Tony, asked this question on FaceBook:

> *Which preachers are best at connecting w/ culture (other than Keller)? Iâ€™ve just listened to 5 sermons on prophets (by 5 preachers) with NO connection to the world in which we live (though not w/o application to personal life).*

It was meant as a throwaway question, not the subject for deep meditation, but I found myself musing on it and decided to write a blog post.

The first thing to note, is that I haven't a clue which preachers are best at connecting with culture. For reasons which may make another blog post, I hardly ever listen to sermons unless I'm in the congregation when they are preached. I'm sure people like Tim Keller are wonderful preachers, but I have (and am unlikely ever to have) no first hand knowledge of that.

With that out of the way, let's talk about culture.

There is a problem in the English language, in that we tend to use the word 'culture' in a number of sometimes contradictory ways.

For some, culture means high art; opera, literature, art-house cinema and the like. Some will argue that this view of culture refers to artistic or technical merit, though to my eyes, it seems to have far more to do with class and elitism.

Then there is 'popular culture', blockbuster cinema, crime novels and Ed Sheeran.

At this point, it is worth noting that there are some who would insist that popular music and what have you is not "real culture". This reminds me of hearing someone defend a particularly atonal form of modern music by saying that it was 'culture', to which someone replied; 'so is what you get on a petri-dish'.

However, culture goes way beyond art, music and such and touches every area of our lives. Broadly speaking, culture encodes the unspoken rules which ease human interaction within a society. Let's look at two examples of 'English culture'. I realise that there are exceptions to these two, but they hold broadly across the country.

If someone offers you a biscuit to go with your cup of tea, it is usual to refuse. The host will then say "Go on", to which you reply "Alright then" and take a biscuit. The reasons for this initial refusal are buried deep in English culture and are to do with not wanting to impose yourself on others.

A second example occurs when two friends meet. One will ask the other, "how are you doing?", to which the answer will come "fine", "ok", "fair to middling", "can't complain" or something of that ilk. The crucial thing is that people will reply like this even if they are dying of plague and a tiger has just bitten one of their legs off. In English culture, the initial how are you?/fine exchange is framed as a

question and a response, but in truth it is really an opening statement that says let's talk. If you really want to know about someone's health, you then ask a follow up question along the lines of "so how have you been doing, then?".

I've met some earnest Christians who insist on being "honest" and giving a full reply to an initial "how are you?" question. It feels very awkward because it is not so much honest, as ignoring the way that social interactions work in this culture.

Putting all this together, the best, easy working definition of culture that I have come across is "the things that everyone in a society instinctively knows". Culture includes opera and Shakespeare, but it also includes Stormzy and Terry Pratchett, what's more it covers the fact that in a pub you go to the bar to order drinks, you don't sit at a table and wait to be served.

So with all that in mind, let's briefly talk about preachers interacting with culture.

Firstly, preachers are embedded in a particular culture and they can't avoid preaching from their culture. Fifty-years ago, free church ministers would preach in a suit and tie, today you are unlikely to see a tie and in all likelihood the ministerial shirt will not be tucked into the pastoral trousers. This trend mirrors the increasing informality in British culture. More profoundly, the style of preaching is a cultural phenomenon; whether you preach logical, ordered sermons or prefer a more discursive, narrative style is, in part, a reflection of your cultural background.

Now, this isn't what Tony was getting at in his original question, but it is vitally important. We need to realise that many of the things that we insist on in church life spring from our national and regional cultures rather than from the Bible.

In terms of engaging with culture (Tony's original concern), I think that preacher's have two ways of doing this.

The first is to use culture in a broad sense as a basis for interacting with an audience through the use of topical illustrations. The master of this was Jesus. His parables were explanations of how the Old Testament was fulfilled in his life and ministry, but he rarely quoted Scripture; he told stories about characters that his hearers would all recognise. His teaching was all deeply grounded in the culture of his time and place.

Modern preachers and teachers are generally pretty good at doing the same thing - though there is nothing quite so embarrassing as a middle-aged preacher trying to look cool by making some reference to youth culture and getting it wrong. However, my suspicion is that the real experts in this area are youth and children's workers who have to work hard to base their talks on their hearers' shared experiences.

The second way to interact with culture is to challenge and subvert it; to show how the gospel turns the world upside down. In my experience, evangelical preachers are less likely to do this - partly because they concentrate on individual conversion and sanctification and place less stress on the

way in which the gospel challenges society as a whole. Perhaps the best example I know of this sort of thing comes from the way in which Paul uses his teaching about Jesus in Colossians 1 to subvert the whole way that the Roman Empire works - I blogged about the climax of this here: The Strangest Verse In The Bible. Paul's attack on Rome is devastating, but it is so subtle and culturally embedded that most modern commentators don't even realise that that's what he is doing.

This is a much longer answer than Tony was expecting toÂ his original question, but I hope it gives him and others something to think about. If the bit about English culture was interesting, I thoroughlyÂ recommend the excellent bookÂ Watching the EnglishÂ by Kate Fox. I'd go so far as to say that if you are a preacher in the UK, you MUST read it. It's an essential part of getting to grips with the culture that you are preaching from and to.Â