

Up, high above the memorial plaque to my father in Liverpool Parish Church, is another memorial, a huge figure of Mary and John standing at the foot of the Cross. Was Jesus both one of us and One with God? That is the question John's Gospel sets out and what Michael J. Buckley's book, 'What do you seek?' prods answer to in a highly original series of 14 short homilies. We are used to speaking of the scandal of the Cross. We are worn down by the scandal that is the Church. What these superbly written essays address is the scandal of the professional religious - our contemporary pharisees. He is not swinging a baseball bat or wagging his finger. Instead he seeks to get beneath the problem - the 'crust' as he says that builds up by becoming smiths of endless words.

He does not give the Parish Church as an example, but it is what he is getting at. How do we deal with the fact that this church served the bankers of the slave trade, that the family fortune from which it gave benefice was the same family that had more slaves than any other at the close of British slavery? How was it that the Head of this church, when Duke of York had officially begun that slave trade by initialising slaves with the initials 'DY'? Faith in the Cross of Christ is supposed to unleash the power of the resurrection, the power that evaporates hate and violence from the human heart and ends the rule of demonic powers, British Empire and all. In John's Gospel, when Heaven descends to Earth, the veil between the two is torn apart. Love at the heart of creation comes to envelope creation in a new creation. How do we respond at the foot of the cross, as the professionally religious, the inheritors of the gospel to this utter contradiction between history and faith? Buckley turns the gaze from the outside to the inside and turns the question on ourselves.

I could criticise so much about this book: its philosophy all over the place, questionable exegesis, strident dogmatic assertions and indulgence in precious piety. Buckley is a Jesuit! On one level the homilies really annoy me. On another level, these criticisms just distract from the skilful use of the surgeon's knife of the soul that he offers the reader. Bring the book to a retreat house or to a holiday resort. It will annoy you but it will stimulate a debate inside you and offer a stimulus for discussion with fellow professionals.