

Trust them or Sue them?

East Window, Spring 2005

Are you old enough to remember those days when people really used to trust one another? When front doors were left open and walking out alone at night was never a problem? Or maybe I'm being romantically nostalgic and it's always been a fool's game to trust another human being? The world seems to think it's better to sue them rather than trust them? It was however the wise Dr Johnson who said, "It is better to have been sometimes cheated than never to have trusted." He reminds us that trusting others is somehow fundamental to a fulfilled and happy human life.

But right now, there's not much trust about. Teachers are not trusted to get on with teaching without endless forms and league tables; parents are not trusted to cuddle their own children in public; people don't trust doctors and nurses to have tried their best and take them to court for any mistake; and all politicians are assumed to be in it for their own benefit.

Some believe this break-down in trust is due to the fact that we have changed from being a society based on service to others, to one based on market-place values. Money has made the difference. My father enjoyed being a bus driver when it was understood to be a 'service' industry – he felt he was there to look after his passengers. But he despaired when the bus company made him call his passengers 'customers' – no longer was he there to provide a service for them but to take their money and make a profit for the company. And the same market-place mentality seems to infect everything and everyone.

It has infected the media too, who find it easier to make money by creating 'personalities' – whereas in the days of trust, we looked not for 'personalities' but we were concerned about people's 'character'. This means that today an election can stand or fall on media hype about personalities rather than on the efficacy or morality of policies.

I heard a radio finance guru say, when he was telling listeners where to invest their savings, "forget loyalty! – go to the place that will give you the best financial return." When the market-place mentality teaches us to forget loyalty, it's little wonder that loyalty is being squeezed out of personal relationships too. We're even advised to sign a contract before marriage to determine who gets what when we divorce – as if to make preparations to swap our old husband later for a new model at the best rate of exchange. Not much room for trust there!

But before we get too depressed, it's good to notice that there's a completely different side to this. Living in an increasingly complex society means that in fact we are learning to rely on others more than any generation before us. In centuries past, if you left someone on a desert island they'd probably know how to fish and hunt, make fire, cook and build a raft and sail on home. Today, we'd be lost in panic as soon as our mobile's battery went flat. Independent we are not! We might say we don't trust institutions but we still drink the tap-water that's piped from the water company; we still take medicines created by big pharmaceutical companies; we turn the switch and expect someone to supply our electricity; and every morning we snooze away while the train driver takes us safely to work. I'm trusting others with my life every day – and they said there was no more trust?

The fact is that God has created us to trust and without trust we dare not get out of bed in the morning! God makes us for each other, and whether we like it or not, we simply have to rely on one another. God makes us for relationship, and trusts us to form the most trusting relations possible – in other words, to love one another. For what is trust if it is not just another way of loving? When God gives the Ten Commandments to Moses most of them tell us to give others occasion to trust us – “don’t steal, don’t covet other people’s belongings, don’t cheat on your wife, don’t lie about others, don’t murder – build a world of trust.” And why does God make so much of this? Because God himself is to be trusted and he has made us in his image. God wants us to be in a covenant of trust with him, not in love with money, the market place or competitive bargaining. The Godly Covenant is this: we will trust God and God will trust us. And Jesus proves the point. How do you know you can trust what Jesus says about God’s love for you? – just look at the cross. You can trust every word he says.

If humankind does not learn to live life the ‘Covenant’ way – the loving and trusting way – then the whole thing will unravel. Turning everything into a market-place is dangerous. Turning everything into another opportunity to love, is life itself.

+ *Laurie Bradwell*