

Christian Faith and the Expression of Civilisation...

Try to recall Europe when the great cathedrals were first implanted in its cities like the imprint of the Cross. Of the soaring pillars and the Gothic arches – the trees of the forest as it were set in stone. Think of the mysterious stirrings of plainsong and of four part song in Notre Dame, the musicians of Guido of Arezzo. Perotin and Leonin. And monks coming out of the darkness singing the words of St Thomas Aquinas: *Pange lingua, gloriosi Corporis Mysterium. Now my tongue the mystery telling, of the Glorious Body sing.*

Of Anselm and Abelard. Of a world of intellectual daring and virtuosity meditating on the metaphysics of being – and the whole of being known and demonstrated as deriving from God. Of Dante who set the cosmos to sing the glory of God *turned like unto a wheel all at one speed by the love that moves the sun and the other stars.*

And think of the paintings, the truth of our salvation emblazoned in pigments, striking images so telling they embodied the realities they showed: Annunciation, Virgin and Child, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension. And the whole people of Europe going by the calendar of Epiphany ploughing, Lent lilies, Easter, Whit, Trinity, Lammas, Michaelmas. And returning again into the purple of Advent's deep midwinter. The whole tapestry of the year illuminated by the occasional glories of saints' days, turning up in all their colours like a holy pack of cards. All this was Christian civilisation.

Now of course people will leave this sermon saying, "Peter's a romantic fool; nostalgic for a paradise that never was; the age of troubadours and chivalry, of knights and ladies – but he obstinately forgets the mud and the squalor, the plague, the poverty and the cruelty of medieval wars!"

No – I do not forget those things. Let's get one thing clear: the Christian civilisation was full of sin and suffering; people behaved wickedly and were depraved in those days, as they are in ours. Human nature has not changed from their time to ours. But let me remind you – it is the Christian Faith which tells us that human nature does not change. It is our own time which teaches the modernising heresy of *progress*.

But Christian Europe has vanished. How did this come about? How did we become the changed civilisation which we are today? The answer is gradually. As R.G. Collingwood said, history is a process of *wobbles* – tiny wobbles which seem insignificant but which over time alter the whole axis and orbit. The rise of the individual nations of Europe, their national navies competing for the treasures of exploration, weakened the sense of a single continental homeland. The invention of the printing press encouraged a new personal and localised authority and the circulation of diverging opinions.

Time and the passage of time. Think in centuries. First, the thought came that of course men still need God – but they don't need a monolithic church and a divine priesthood to guarantee God's grace by Sacraments. Every man his own priest. Go forward a century and the next step. The sense of God at the centre slowly evaporates and the individual thinking, feeling man puts himself at the centre. Descartes does not begin with God. He begins with *I think, therefore I am*. Martin Luther is a lovely

warm-hearted Christian, passionate as Beethoven, but his feelings about God loom larger than the being of God.

Add to these things the crisis literature of the age – the great plays of Shakespeare. The existential anxiety of the age: *To be or not to be*. And again the centrality of human thought and the abolition of the moral law combined in *There's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so*. And you sense the cry of despair as the great Shakespeare sees the world, the whole creation as *sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought*. And even *all sound and fury signifying nothing*. Or *a foul and pestilential congregation of vapours*.

Keep going, if you have the stomach for it. Next we have the denial of God and the repudiation of human nature. The French Revolution seeks to promote state atheism by terror and export it by war. And, because its leaders know that human beings are rooted in time and habit, destroys the Christian calendar. Jean Jacques Rousseau abolishes the doctrine of Original Sin. We are not born liable to go wrong. Instead, he says, we are born perfect and corrupted by civilisation. Keep going into the machine age and the reduction of all life to the concepts of scientific mechanism.

And so into the 20th century and mankind armed to the teeth with the weapons of technological heat death; liberated from the doctrine of Original Sin; raised in the Freudian dogma that, so far from being made in the image of God, we now believe that God is the image of our neurotic projections; ditching the doctrine that we have freewill and believing instead that we are governed entirely by economic and historical forces beyond our control – thus we loose our new enlightenment on the world. Dialectical Materialism. Atheistic Communism. Nazism. And a century of destruction that makes the so called *cruel* middle ages seem like Sunday afternoon in the park.

And what we have now in the 21st century is Europe depraved. By ditching God we have psychotically reoriented the origin of our being in ourselves, in the individual consciousness. By ditching the doctrine of human sinfulness and the need for a Redeemer, we schizophrenically and catastrophically misunderstand human nature. Modern Europe thinks it has outgrown God. And so modern Europeans are lost souls. When we lose God we lose the essential and central reference and with it all criteria for making judgements of any sort. We no longer understand what it is to be creatures, to be human. And because we do not know what manner of men we are, how can we know what we do? And so in morals we do as we like. And in art anything is art from the Sistine Chapel to Duchamp's urinal. Do not, however, attempt to pee in this or you will be arrested by the cultural police.

We are the hollow men. This is the waste land. For fifty years the leading philosophers in Europe have answered Pilate's question, *What is truth?* by saying there is no such thing as truth. You just *make up your own mind*. What mind? Jacques Derrida says there is no such thing even as meaning. This is suicidal. This is satanic. These are the forces of waste and void loosed upon the earth. The bigger catastrophe is that the Christians churches in Europe have gone along with this iconoclasm, this spiritual debauchery and called it enlightenment, liberation and *man come of age*.

But the leaders of this modernity are not, as they sometimes like to present themselves, easy-going, relaxed, tolerant of Christianity. They hate us. Europe of God's brooding presence in every village church, blazing in his Real Presence in the paintings of the Italian Renaissance, calling to us in the glory of Bach's trumpets and the C-minor *via dolorosa* of the last chorus of *The St Matthew Passion* – they hate all that. These modern atheists and anti-Christians have obliterated even the name of God from their dead-born Constitution. It will not be long before, under that collocation of rancid euphemisms known as political correctness, aspects of Christian expression itself will be criminalized as *offensive* to their unbelieving authoritarianism.

This week alone two assaults. The unschooled petulant drivellings of Richard Dawkins in his programme attacking religion as *the root of all evil* and the gloating of that transcendental egoist David Starkey over what he calls *the death of Christianity*.

Good – bring 'em on! Bring 'em all on We children of the martyrs in the amphitheatre shall not be affrighted by these media beasts with no understanding. Last Friday's distinguished preacher said to me, *We'll go down fighting*. I said, *Who's talking about going down? Not at St Michael's, we're not!*

Our Lord has promised that *the gates of hell shall not prevail* against his church. He did not however guarantee that the European churches would be preserved through their decadence. Europe, for 1500 years the cradle of the faith, is now its persecutor. We must not take this lying down. We do have a fight on our hands. And the atheist continent will collapse because there is nothing fundamental to sustain its delusions, its superstitious secularism, its hideous godlessness.

And how do we fight? By a relentless barrage of criticism, scorn, satire and mockery of this vacuous usurpation. By intelligence, argument and passion. By believing. By trusting Our Lord Jesus Christ. By prayer and devotion and Sacrament. The resistance starts here. Come and help me. Bring as many others as you can lay hands on. It is a battle for the soul of our continent. Do not be dismayed. *Soldiers of Christ arise – and put your armour on.*