

Sermon: Christian believing...

Last week I gave you all some homework. I asked you to take a look at an article by Raymond Tallis in which he criticised some of the main currents of thought of the last hundred years or so. But let's not call them *thoughts*. Let's call them *superstitions*. This was a good article because it encouraged people to question ideas that have for too long been regarded as true and valid without any serious objection. I am talking about ideas which have dominated the way we think for over a century. These ideas are all the more dangerous because they have never been properly criticised and examined. We have forgotten Plato's cautionary advice: *The unexamined life is not worth living*.

To start with, there are some outlandishly false ideas which are harmless. The idea that the moon is made of green cheese for instance. You disprove it by sending some Americans up to bring back stones and rocks. In other words, you test the idea and prove it wrong. But then there are other false ideas that are far from harmless. Ideas so harmful in fact that they can pervert the whole way we think of ourselves and the nature of human life and character. One of the most dangerous of all these false ideas is that of *progress*. And it has gone unexamined.

Let me give you some more homework. Listen to the radio and TV and just make a note of how often you find the word *medieval* used to mean cruel, savage and primitive. But the Middle Ages gave us Dante's *Divine Comedy* – perhaps the greatest long philosophical poem ever composed. The medieval period saw the life and work of St Thomas Aquinas – a brilliant meditation on the being and nature of God. The Middle Ages saw the recovery of classical learning, the building of the great cathedrals – the finest structures the world has ever seen. Progress in mathematics. The origin of western music in churches such as Notre Dame.

But listen to the BBC and you'd think that the Middle Ages were just millions of people rolling about in mud and slime, stirring themselves now and again to commit bloody slaughter. Of course there were wars in those days. There *was* cruelty and slaughter. But it was all on a much smaller scale than the carnage of our times. The Middle Ages a time of mass killing? What about Paschendaele and the Somme. The six million Jews murdered by Hitler. The more than twenty millions murdered by Stalin. The countless corpses of Chairman Mao. Hiroshima. The Killing fields in Cambodia, Rwanda. We could go on all morning listing the atrocities committed in our supposedly enlightened times. And the worst of all this is that it doesn't matter how often you point it out, the universal assumption, fed and reinforced by the mass media, is that we are living in an enlightened age, the age of progress. It's just not true.

And it's very dangerous because, if we think of ourselves as progressive and progressing – getting better all the time – as the Beatles used to sing, then we shall do nothing to correct our barbarity. The Prayer Book puts this a lot better than I can: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*. Ah yes, but sin is something the modern world only sniggers at – a bit of a fumble when you shouldn't, one over the eight, two extra cream cakes. The modern world thinks that the Christian view of humankind as sinners is primitive, *passé*, something we have outgrown. But it is the modern doctrine of progress which is plain wrong. And

dangerous – for if we do not acknowledge our sins, we have no chance of putting things right.

The Christian faith is mocked and scorned as out of date, primitive, *medieval* everywhere you look in the modern world. But the Christian faith has us bang to rights. Never mind gawping lustfully at the horrors of mass slaughter over the last hundred years. You don't need to look any further than your own soul. A moment's self-examination and you know you do things that make you ashamed, and that the only relief you get is by owning up, saying you're sorry and trying to start afresh.

There is a horrible word used everywhere as if it really meant something nice, something desirable. This is the expression *self-esteem*. Read the papers and the lifestyle magazines. We're all supposed to have self-esteem. Children are to be encouraged to develop their self-esteem. But they shouldn't be. Self-esteem is the one thing we shouldn't have. Do we esteem ourselves, think well of ourselves? Indeed we do. There is something of the Pecksniff in all of us. But it's wrong. It's a false picture of human nature. Christianity tells it as it is. We should not esteem ourselves but *acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness*. That is the only way to start to make moral progress.

Along with the modern superstition of progress goes the other false idea that we are *liberated* by modernity. Now if anything this is an even more stupid and dangerous notion than the idea of progress. For I want you just to look with me at the ideas that have governed us in the modern period. And we get a nasty shock. For all the big ideas of the last hundred years are far from liberating. They are colossally restricting, imprisoning. All these big ideas say that we are in the grip of forces beyond our control.

Look at Freud who has permeated art, films and novels for over a century. And what does he tell us? – that all our problems were caused when we were infants, fixated orally, genitally and anally; that the creative output of western civilisation derives from the last eight inches of the alimentary canal. It makes you wonder who is talking out of his bottom here. Freud told our whole civilisation that we are enslaved by unconscious forces. And our whole civilisation believed him. But the really astonishing thing is that we accepted the enslavement and thought it *liberating*.

The other two false prophets are Darwin and Marx. Perhaps not Darwin directly but the neo-Darwinians such as Richard Dawkins who is forever squawking that our lives are controlled by our selfish genes. Dawkins says that belief in the mind or the soul is a delusion; that all art and scientific thought is an accidental by-product of a merely material universe. We want perhaps to ask him the interesting question: *Does that go for your own scientific thought, Richard?* For in that case there is no more reason to believe Dawkins' biological theories than to believe that the moon really is made of green cheese.

The other prophet of enslavement in this unholy trinity is Karl Marx who said that we are all in the grip of economic forces, that all our politics and social relationships are governed by these forces and that the outcomes of history are *inevitable*. I must say again, the truly amazing thing is not that men should have dreamed up these enslaving ideas – the idea that we have no freewill – but that the modern world should have

listened to their message and thought it *liberating*! All the clamour is for freedom of speech – usually by the people who deny that we have freedom of thought and will.

And all this talk of *progress* and *liberation* – in the face of modernity's career of mass slaughter and intellectual enslavement – is used as a stick with which to beat Christianity as something primitive, outmoded and unbelievable. But what does Christianity actually say? Not that we are slaves at the mercy of unconscious forces or historical inevitability or the selfish gene. But God made us in his own image. We know we go wrong. God loves us so much he sent his Son to die for us. And because Christ died and rose again, we are forgiven and we shall live with God forever.

Now that's progress. That's liberating.