

Sermon: Civilisation and Terror

And when he was come near he beheld the City and wept over it. Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong to thy peace!

So a few days before his execution, Jesus weeps over the City of Jerusalem. Well might we weep over our City, over the terrible events which are happening worldwide and now also in London. We are in the middle of celebrations of the end of the Second World War. Sixty years of peace. Those who are about my age are the first generation in centuries which has not lived through a European war. The Second World War is long past. Now we are entered on the Third World War. New York. Madrid. Bali. Chechnya. Sudan. Baghdad. And now London.

This time the enemy is not coming at us in tanks and submarines. They are not being engaged by our *Spitfires* and *Hurricanes* over the fields of Kent. This is not modern warfare. This is post-modern warfare. It does not have conventional battlefields. The battlefield is everywhere. Its combatants use post-modern technology. Powerful explosives made out of consumer products. Bombs which can be detonated by mobile phones. Communications and plots via the Internet. And terrorists who claim to be followers of a faith which prohibits images of the human form are using the Internet to broadcast worldwide pictures of beheadings to encourage recruitment to their cause.

I don't want to talk about the terrorists or the religion which they claim to represent. I do want to talk about ourselves and to try to understand what has befallen our civilisation – not at the hands of an enemy, but at our own hands. We must not be tempted to think that what is happening is anything new. It has happened many times before. You do not need to be a fully paid up supporter of Oswald Spengler to notice that every civilisation has its ascendancy, its glory days and then its demise. You do not have to take Edward Gibbon as gospel to realise that empires fall through internal weakness and corruption as much as by external threat.

What is now happening to us in the West is what had happened to the City of Jerusalem, the people of Israel, over whom Jesus wept. *If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong to thy peace!* And the lament of Our Lord was only an echo of the lament of all the prophets. Isaiah lived in a time when his country was threatened with destruction – as we are today. And what did he say? His eyes focussed not on the enemy but on his own people. He said this:

Ah sinful nation! A people laden with iniquity; ye revolt more and more; the whole head is sick and the heart fainteth...

He asked, *How is the faithful City become an harlot?*

Again Jeremiah the prophet looked around at the nation facing destruction and asked, *Where are the gods that thou hast made for thyself? See if they will save thee in thy time of trouble!*

He looked at his people and said, *They are altogether brutish and foolish. Their stock is a doctrine of vanities.*

Of course the people didn't like to hear this. People always blame the messenger when the message is bad. They put Jeremiah in a pit. But Jeremiah was not gloating over the destruction about to hit his nation. He wept. He said,

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold and see if there is any sorrow like unto my sorrow...mine eyes do fail with my tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver is poured upon the earth for this destruction...

But the destruction Jeremiah was lamenting was not the destruction perpetrated by the enemy. It was the destruction which the nation had done to itself. In like manner, our destruction is not something done by Al Qaeda. It is what we have done to ourselves. Like Jeremiah's people, we have turned away from God. In the Lord's words, we have forgotten the things that belong to our peace.

We have abandoned the moral law because we assume we have outgrown it. Sexual faithfulness is a joke. We put our trust in the personal contact ads, clubbing and *Viagra*. And then the consequences: Jesus said, *Whosoever shall offend the least of these my little ones, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea*. But our talk is only of lowering the age of consent and 190,000 abortions every year: a massacre of innocents to try to conceal our lust.

Crimes of violence are at an all time high. Envy and covetousness have been transformed: we no longer regard them as sinful, but as the basis of economic reality; the consumer society; pig philosophy; *patent digesters and Mayfair clothes-horses*; colour supplements; television as a perpetual sequence of adverts and jingles. A fretful, anxious society at the end of its tether. *We have worn everything threadbare – even sin*.

But forget the last six commandments for a minute and remember the first four. Remember, these are the crimes against God. *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*. But in the street and on the mass media we have institutionalised blasphemy. 3500 blasphemies in *Jerry Springer: The Musical*. *Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image*. But we are in thrall to *image*. We are constantly exhorted to improve our image. All is image and no reality. Everything is surface with no depth. We live in a two-dimensional society. All appearance and no reality. We spend all our resources on appearances. To be is to be seen when reality is a screen.

You think this is bad? There's worse. Our society no longer officially believes in God. Educational policy strictly forbids indoctrination – what used to be called Christian teaching, the putting in of doctrine. Every child is encouraged to make up his own mind. The idea of sacred scripture has been abandoned. If you persist in saying that there is a difference between good and bad, you will be condemned for being *judgmental*. If you yet maintain there is a difference between true and false, you will be dismissed as naïve and bigoted.

Our enemies look on all this. They look at western society and its values and they sneer. They hold us in contempt. Many of them wish to destroy us because they say

we are degenerate and worthless. Can we deny this – as we stagger from the disco to the DVD store or book package holidays to excess and oblivion? As we hold the glorious creations of western civilisation as mere examples of *elitism*? As we take *The Da Vinci Code* and *Harry Potter* for sacred scripture and consciousness-erasing drugs for sacraments?

Is there any hope on the eve of destruction? There is. But we must do something. Isaiah the prophet tells us what to do: we must return to God. *In returning and rest shall ye be saved. In quietness and confidence shall be your strength; but ye would not.*

The Lord Jesus says, *Thou killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee.*

But God is infinitely loving and tender, and he will have us back even at this late hour. Hear then the word of the Lord to the City and to our nation:

How often would I have gathered thy children together even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, but ye would not? Behold your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.