

Was the Bishop of Truro's sermon a curate's egg?

Bishop William Ind preached the sermon at the Drapers' Election Service last week. It was the first time I'd met him and I found him to be a delightful man, full of cheerful good humour, and we enjoyed a very pleasant conversation before the service. He preached in a lively manner an interesting sermon full of telling phrases and apt anecdotes. It was very good to welcome him to St Michael's.

The theme of his sermon was that we should help the badly off, "bottom of the pile" people – as he called them, "the socially excluded". He told a most affecting story about a woman who had suffered hard times herself who nevertheless devoted herself to looking after an old couple who were housebound, the husband suffering from heart trouble and the wife dementia. The admonition was to go and do thou likewise.

I think we all would help the poor and needy in this direct way, given the opportunity. But the Bishop failed to raise a far more important issue: the restoration and maintenance of our national institutions. The Drapers Company, alongside all the livery companies, renders a great deal of practical help and support to the poor. But what sort of men and women do we find in the livery companies? We find the majority are successful professionals on the crest of their careers: lawyers, financiers, doctors, members of the armed forces, captains of industry. Or retired senior people with a lifetime's experience of public service behind them.

These are the movers and shakers, leaders of the country, the most capable and influential people we have. It is their job to secure the institutions of our national life and to guard against their degeneration and decay. The great national institutions are the law, the armed forces, the university, parliament, the press, the church and the monarchy. These institutions are the family silver. They are what set the whole tone of public life. They are above party politics. Our forbears created these institutions so that we do not die of politics. When our institutions are in good order, the country prospers because it is being administered efficiently on the basis of intellectual and moral excellence.

Britain is in a bad way today because for decades we have neglected to maintain the integrity of our institutions. The quality of life has consequently declined. Parliament no longer has the authority it had, as we see it circumvented by self-appointed cliques and lobbies. The law seems so often to favour the rights of criminals over the protection of the public; and sentencing policy is incoherent and impotent in the face of widespread violent criminality.

The university is supposed to be a place of excellence, but it has been dumbed down and standards have fallen catastrophically. The university was the elite pinnacle of humane society in Europe for a thousand years. The fact that "elitism" is now only a dirty word says all that needs to be said by way of explanation for its decline. It is hard to take seriously such courses as "golf and hairdressing studies". Nothing wrong with golf and hairdressing, but their study is not something which should take place in a university. The armed forces are ill-equipped and overstretched, the regiments diminished

There used to be a difference between the serious and the popular press, but now they are indistinguishable. *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* now carry stories and pictures more lurid and voyeuristic than that which used to be the preserve of the salacious *News of the World*. *The Times* in its *Body and Soul* supplement offers lessons in masturbation and advice on sexual bondage. Much of what appears in all the papers is frankly pornographic. They have long since abolished the distinction between culture and pop-culture and the “music” columns are more likely to feature rock and roll than Mendelssohn. If the papers are bad, the electronic media are worse.

The monarchy has suffered loss of deference and respect and members of the Royal Family are not much different in the public consciousness from any other gang of celebs. Certainly the mass media encourages the public to regard them much as it regards movie stars and footballers’ wives. The Church has thrown out its traditional Bible and Prayer Book and replaced them with inferior substitutes, while at the same time following mere secular fashion in matters of morality. It has also largely discarded the essential supernatural basis of the faith. As an authentically religious institution, the Church has effectually resigned.

The Bishop is right to insist we exercise personal help and kindness to those much less well off. But he was talking to the wrong audience and missing the opportunity to say the things that Bishops ought to say – explicitly, if we care about the general health and well-being of society, from top to bottom, we should look to the repair and maintenance of our great institutions.

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