

The City New Year Service, Friday, 13th January 2006, St Michael Cornhill

Address by Ken Costa, Chairman of Europe, Middle East and Africa, UBS Investment Bank, Chairman of Alpha International, Church Warden of Holy Trinity Brompton.

I heard Vincente Fox, the president of Mexico, speaking at the World Economic Forum at Davos. He addressed the business and political leaders with these words:

‘No aspect of contemporary life is more notable and less understood than the spiritual discontent and restlessness that is spreading worldwide. This unease is present amongst those who are safe and wealthy as well as among the poor and desperate. We can now see throughout the world a rejection of crass materialism and an intense, undirected desire for spiritual rebirth.’

Finding meaning and purpose in life is, I believe, the greatest challenge of our time. This search is as essential to establishing lasting peace, sustainable economic activity and strong communities at ease with each other as any of the other major challenges of climate change, elimination of extreme poverty or globalisation.

Fox describes the current desire for spiritual renewal as intense and I believe that he is right. There seems to be a new determination particularly among young people to search for values which underpin a meaningful way of life. This surge in spiritual hunger is increasing and the institutional church has often found itself unable to provide the necessary food. For so many people this search therefore continues without guidance, undirected and into the dead ends of contemporary fads.

You will all be aware of Google's phenomenal IPO last year. In many ways Google represents the aspirations of our age. 'Google and you will find'. Not only do we have more knowledge now than ever before but this knowledge is accessible and able to be mined simultaneously and as easily in the frenzied trading floors of our cities as in the dusty community post offices and internet portals of rural Africa. We have been overwhelmed by knowledge and the mere access to this knowledge base has not increased our wisdom or made us happier, or satisfied our thirst for meaning. We need to remind ourselves of the words of Jesus that whoever seeks will find, not mere knowledge, but the key to living well. This is as true today as it was then. But we have become knowledge long and wisdom short. To address this, we need to recover the essence of wisdom which the Bible tells us:

'starts with God – the first step in learning is bowing down to God'.

In his introduction to the Proverbs, Eugene Petersen describes wisdom as follows:

'Wisdom has to do with becoming skilful in honouring our parents and raising our children, handling our money and conducting our sexual lives, going to work and exercising leadership, using words well and treating friends kindly, eating and drinking healthily, cultivating emotions within ourselves and attitudes toward others that make for peace. Threaded through all these items is the insistence that the way we think of, and respond to God is the most practical thing we do. In matters of everyday practicality nothing, absolutely nothing, takes precedence over God.'

Here lies the truth, God is at work in his world. We remember the Our Father which reminds us that his will is done on **earth** as it is in heaven. We need to remember that the Lord of all life knows no sacred, secular divide.

The Lord of compassion is also the Lord of commerce.

The Lord of prayer is also the Lord of profit.

The Lord of mission is also the Lord of the money markets.

He is Lord of all and His spirituality starts with a clear mission to bring healing and restoration to the whole of society.

But how do we start a directed spiritual journey?

First we need to look at ourselves. The early church leader Irenaeus said that the glory of God is a human being fully alive. Are we fully alive to God by which I mean, are we living lives fulfilled to the specifications of the original prospectus the creator gave us when He made us. Are we willing to change our own patterns of living to align these with his will.

Michael Caine was once asked to differentiate between a great movie star and a great movie actor. His reply was instructive. The movie star says, 'How can I change the script and story line to fit my personality?' The great actor says, 'How can I change my personality to fit the script and do justice to the story?' If we want to be written into God's script for the world, we need to be prepared to change if our plans are at odds with God's purposes. We yield our programmes to his priorities. We therefore need a spirituality which is neither rigid, static or

compartmentalised but which grows and deepens into every aspect of our lives bringing deep inner peace.

Connectivity is one of the great drivers of modern technology. The speed with which computers can talk to each other, data can be carried and materials made more fluid has enabled us to reach the breakthrough of modern technology. Connectedness distinguishes Christian spirituality from other efforts at calm and peace. So, in this image Jesus Christ is the connector, the fluid and frictionless link between humanity and its creator. Jesus claimed to be the way, giving us direction in life, the truth, setting an objective standard for our lives, and the life, the one who provides meaning and forgiveness, thereby enabling us to live contented lives at ease with God, our neighbour and ourselves.

We all know the frustration of losing the connection when we are online and the delight of uninterrupted broadband connectivity. In earlier translations of John's gospel, Jesus calls on us to 'Abide in me'. This is the key to Christian spirituality. 'Staying connected' might be the modern translation. A true connectedness to God through a living day-to-day relationship with Jesus Christ is the secret of living successfully in the workplace and will transform our relationships at home and at work. The starting point is not our religion but our common humanity precisely the point of God's connection with us through the incarnation.

This Christ-based spirituality motivates us to be part of a wider social and moral order which is worth fighting for and defending. The prevailing structure of our society is based on an atomised view of life which celebrates a very individualistic ethic, demonstrated by the widespread and relentless pursuit of riches. But to seek riches without caring for

others is ultimately to experience poverty. We are impoverished whenever the wider interests of humanity are excluded from our everyday working lives. Our spirituality is not personal and detached but engaged with the critical issues of our time. Many of you were supportive of our ‘Make poverty history’ campaign. This was an example of an important ingredient of Christian spirituality. Our spirituality is enriched in direct proportion to the degree to which we commit ourselves to following Jesus’ example of caring for the marginalised and the excluded.

There is a haunting judgment in Malachi in which God says to the people of Israel that if they disregard his ways, he will curse their blessings. We see each day the tragic consequences of the way in which we have inflicted on ourselves this judgment. We are prosperous but our family life is fragmenting before our very eyes. We have a chronic fear of the future. We are frightened in our streets as crimes against the person grow, and in a myriad of ways, we see the tapestry of our society torn beyond recognition by the unrestrained forces of consumerism, greed and envy. How do we weave back into the tapestry the broken threads which once again could illustrate a true picture of God, reflected in our places at work and in society around us.

The answer to these questions lies in a new directed discovery of hard core Christian spirituality – a faith that has been stripped to its essentials, a faith that recognises that in a relationship with Jesus Christ we are empowered and strengthened each day to withstand the hardships of life and to enjoy the throbbing life of his creation, the joy of work, the blessing of relationships.

Christianity has a distinctive appeal. Our faith enables us to act robustly and to live life to the full, not merely in guilty compromises but filled with joy, hope, aspiration and conviction that in the resurrection God has brought eternity into our lives. We know that tomorrow will come. We do not know what it will bring. But to the Christian it will always bring life at its best even when death intervenes.

Many questions are raised by faith and spirituality. But there is evidence that faith is growing. This bodes well for the future. I recently had lunch with a chairman of a large listed company. At the end of lunch, he turned to me and said that he had been reviewing his life. There were several boxes. The first was work and he felt – rightly in my view – that he had been a success. The second was his family relationships. He had been divorced and he had made a special effort to ensure that his relationships with the children of his first marriage and his new family were good. This had not been easy but he felt that this was a part of his life under control. Another box he marked ‘friendships’. During the last year he had paid particular attention to his friends especially those who in the ceaseless demands of the workplace might have been neglected. He felt enriched by these efforts to rekindle these friendships from university and elsewhere. Then he turned to me and said, ‘But there is one box that is unfilled. I don’t know what to call it. But it would have something to do with the spiritual. I need to make sense of this non-material aspect of my life as I suspect it will give a key to a fuller meaning to the other parts of my life. Somehow this is the missing part of my life.’

I have been privileged to be Chairman of Alpha International. Alpha is a practical introduction to the Christian faith which aims to guide those who are searching to find true fulfilment in their lives. This course has

already been done by nearly 2 million people in this country alone. What has struck me has been the number of lives that have been changed and redirected as a result of a renewed faith in Jesus Christ. This has happened in prisons, schools, universities among the rich and the poor, the secure and the marginalised, the young and the old.

At the end of last year Her Majesty the Queen reminded us of the central importance of our faith. She said, ‘When so much is in flux, when limitless amounts of information, much of it ephemeral, are instantly accessible on demand, there is a renewed hunger for that which endures and gives meaning. The Christian church can speak uniquely to that need, for at the heart of our faith stands the conviction that all people, irrespective of race, background or circumstances, can find lasting significance and purpose in the gospel of Jesus Christ.’

In our search for wisdom let us remember that wisdom starts with God and echo the motto of the Corporation of the City of London, ‘Domine nos dirige’. Lord lead us.