

## Sermon: What a piece of work is man... Trinity XIV 2006

Last week we thought about the character of the Lord Jesus. This morning let us turn to human nature. What are we really like? How best to describe human beings? As Shakespeare put it: *What a piece of work is man*. To answer the question of who we are, we might start by asking, *Who do we think we are?* And if that's a bit abstract and metaphysical, let's ask, *What sort of things do we do, how do we spend our lives, and what do we try to obtain?*

Luckily, we have received a bit of help with this, this week. Various prominent intellectual celebrities – typically they describe themselves as *academics and professionals* - have begun a campaign to change the way we bring up children. They have noticed that children these days are finding it difficult to cope with the increased pace of technological change; they are eating junk food instead of real food; and they are not running about at playtime but instead sitting in front of the television, the computer, the electronic game. And if they talk to one another, they do it by text and mobile phone. So our children's lives have become artificial. They are deprived of reality. In short, say the *academics and professionals*, children are depressed.

I was astonished – well, I suppose I shouldn't have been, given that these concerned people were *professionals and academics* – that there was no suggestion that children be given moral and spiritual teaching. These academics and professionals thus reveal by their own words that they are as dislocated from reality as the children they are trying to help. Most of them turn out to be the usual suspects anyhow: Susan Greenfield the behaviourist neurologist; Philip Pullman the children's writer and militant atheist; Penelope Leach the academic expert on children and families at Birkbeck; Jonathan Porritt, Prince Charles' favourite Green, and various other commissioners for bureaucratic do-gooding, mental health experts, psychologists and general secretaries of social policy quangos.

I appreciate their concern for children's welfare – though they seem to have noticed that we have a problem rather late in the day. But if they think they can improve the lives of children without giving them moral and religious guidance, then they are in cloud cuckoo land. This is because morality, objective values grounded in something transcendent, greater than ourselves, are essential to the successful conduct of human life. Morals and religion are the deepest experiences open to us. Ignore moral and religious values as those *academics and professionals* have done and you are not really dealing with human beings at all, only with mechanicals; not human beings but featherless bipeds acting out their lives according to the sterile principles of materialism.

By contrast our own Ann Widdecombe has seen through all this. I call her *our own* because of course she is an occasional preacher from this pulpit. Ann presented this week's edition of the programme *Don't Get Me Started!* And it was on the subject of self-improvement. She was horrified to notice that nowadays *self-improvement* means only material and physical improvement, cosmetics, diet and consumerism – dehumanising us and turning us into what Thomas Carlyle called *Mayfair clothes-horses and patent digesters*.

*Self-improvement* used to mean educational, intellectual and moral betterment. I am looking back with admiration to the days when the trades' union movement organised The Workers' Educational Association and all sorts of evening and day-release classes – not to learn tai chi, feng shui and self-esteem, but English Literature, history, Plato, Aristotle, musical appreciation and the art of the Renaissance. Part of this great cultural flowering was a nationwide network of Sunday Schools.

The cultural aspects of this happy way of doing things have been banned on the grounds that they were *elitist*. And the religious aspects have been dropped in the interests of *multiculturalism* and *diversity*. It is actually illegal now in our schools to teach that Christianity is true. No wonder our children are bewildered and depressed. The way they are brought up nowadays amounts to child-abuse and neglect.

Now why has this happened? Why have we abandoned a proven way of doing things? Why have we chucked away this fine intelligent and spiritual tradition and heritage? The answer is very simple: because we believe we have outgrown morality and religion. People at large think that morality, objective standards and religious truth are primitive things which we have outgrown. We don't dare cultivate self-respect these days. We cultivate self-esteem instead – which is the one thing the Bible says we shouldn't do, esteem *ourselves*. But we think well of ourselves. And our new fundamental beliefs are in *progress and modernisation*. Every political party preaches these things. They are the pap of countless newspaper and magazine articles and continuous *lifestyle* and *makeover* programmes on radio and TV.

*Progress* is the new religion and it is the religion of science and technological optimism. But it is a false religion, really a form of idolatry. Because *progress* is not happening. *Progress* is the myth the modern world lives by, and it is a delusion, a lie. When anyone in the mass media wants to refer to something truly awful, they describe it as *medieval*. But the Middle Ages were heaven on earth compared to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Progress?* – when there were more people killed in the wars of the last century than in all the wars there have ever been....

No doubt there were religious tyrants in the Middle Ages, but they were only playing at cruelty and repression compared with the modern atheist tyrants, Hitler, Stalin and Mao. Is our progressive morality really an improvement on the old morality? Really? When we have 200,000 abortions each year, most of them as a convenience for fornicators; abortion as a form of contraception? Is the resulting breakdown in marriage and family life to be regarded as *progress*?

Is it *progress* to have ditched the Christian faith in the interests of *multiculturalism* and *diversity*? Is it *progress* to imagine we can replace sexual morality with the single slogan *Anything goes so long as you wear a condom*? Is it *progress* for the Church of England to throw out *The Book of Common Prayer* and replace it with the jargon of the new Babel? I sometimes think that if they want to fill the plinths in Trafalgar Square with sculptures that really depict our firmest beliefs today, they should provide models of an aborted foetus, a condom, a slice of halal meat and a copy of *The Alternative Service Book*

And then, at a slightly lower level, we could find plinths to honour our lesser gods: mobile phones; playstations; expensive trainers (for people who have never been

known to run anywhere); designer clobber with fashionable logos; junk food; trashy books and all the other accoutrements of clubbing and drugging, the mindless pop-culture and shopping 24/7.

The modern world persists in its denial of reality. We won't acknowledge our true human nature. We pretend. We lull ourselves into a world of phoney progress and hubristic self-esteem. Is it any wonder that the children are perplexed and depressed? The secular *professionals and academics* are powerless to help – precisely because *they are* secularists, materialists and progressives. They do not know what human nature is really like. They do not understand what human beings are.

So to answer the question. We are sinners. We are not perfect. We are not *progressing* anywhere. But cheer up! This does not mean that we are totally depraved, abject and impotent to do anything to make things better. But the first thing we have to do to start to make things better is to see ourselves as we are and not as we fondly imagine our lovely little self-esteeming selves to be.

Once we acknowledge our imperfection and turn to God and ask for his Grace, things start to brighten up. We are the sinners for whom Christ died. This same Christ will raise us up in the resurrection to new life. But: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us all our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Those *academics and professionals*, frightfully concerned for the well-being of our children, should listen to what Christ says: *Suffer the little children to come unto me.*