

Sermon Trinity XII: Restoring Belief....

This reminds me of school and the first day of term when the headmaster hadn't quite finished working out the timetable, so we were given stop-gap things to do. Always it was, *Write an essay about what you did in your holidays*. Well this year we went to Mike Willett's farm in Sussex, and then spent a few days walking on the Yorkshire coast. One of the pleasures was time for reading. This remarkable book called *Without Roots*. Its origin is quite uncanny. It happened that Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, and Professor Marcello Pera, President of the Italian Senate, each gave a lecture on the same day. They hadn't colluded. Neither knew about the other's talk. And yet, as it turned out, they both said more or less the same thing.

Curiouser and curiouser because Ratzinger is one of the most accomplished theologians of the last hundred years and Pera is a secularist. But here's an extract from what Pera said:

Christianity, he said has been the greatest force in Western history, but now regarding the features of the West, none of them have universal value. We are in a state of self-censorship and self-repression that goes by the name of Political Correctness...

...there is the failure to obtain recognition of the Christian roots of Europe in the new (and now defunct) European Constitutional Treaty; the malaise of Europe, a rich continent that is unsure of its identity and its future and powerless to solve the resulting problems; and finally the West's boredom with its own principles and values at the very moment in which it is targeted by a deadly war declared and conducted by Islamic fundamentalism....

Marcello Pera is telling the truth. He says that we in the West are no longer allowed even to believe that there *is* absolute truth. There is only the great rainbow of opinions – every one as good as any other like bananas in a bunch. There is only one absolute: relativism. And if I may offer a contradictory slogan which defines modern society: ABSOLUTE RELATIVISM RULES OK?

But to quote Pera again:

The belief that there is indeed a truth, valid and binding within history itself in the figure of Jesus Christ and in the faith of the church is referred to as fundamentalism. And since fundamentalism is treated as the eighth deadly sin, better to take the vow of relativism, especially since relativism appears to be the philosophical basis of democracy...

And he warns us:

Christianity is so consubstantial to the West that any surrender of Christianity would have devastating consequences. For the only thing worse than living without roots is struggling to get by without a future.

And all this from the secularist President of the Italian Senate! I was going to go on to quote the Pope's lecture. But there's no need, is there? Marcello Pera has preached his sermon for him and said it all.

Everywhere we look we see Christian civilisation under threat. Christian values are mocked and scorned daily in the mass media. But the BBC pulled the plug on Rolf Harris when he was about to tell a few jokes about Islam. Europe was built on the Christian faith. The values of Europe are set in the stone and glass of the medieval cathedrals. In 12th century harmonies from Notre Dame. In *The St Matthew Passion*. In Tallis, Gibbons, Palestrina and Byrd – music we still enjoy to the glory of God in this place. In the truly religious paintings of Giotto and the thirteenth century Italian masters.

The tragedy is that respectable people, influential people here in the City and movers and shakers throughout our great institutions believe that civilisation and a decent going on will just continue without anyone actually having to believe the gospel and say their prayers. In fact it's worse: the modern mindset of these influential and powerful people is that they have actually risen far above Christianity – all those miracles and tall stories about the Resurrection. It was good enough for St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, but it's not quite good enough for today's inhabitants of Lombard Street and the very modern and exquisitely refined Master of the Worshipful Company of Screwtop Bottlemakers.

The horrible state of the English middle class today is seen in its trading on the beliefs and values which it no longer practises. They offer their "support" for Christianity without actually believing it themselves. They come to church only on civic occasions as a ritual form of self-advertisement. If truth be known, they think they have distilled the essence of Christianity and they practise something like that satirised in Reinhold Niebuhr's slogan:

A God without wrath brings men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.

The leaders of our society, politicians, formers of opinion, arbiters of taste and fashion imagine that our civilisation can continue indefinitely without the absolute truths of religion and morality. And if you believe in absolute values, you're dismissed as a bigot and an obscurantist. The EU has just warned Poland that its citizens are too conservative. They refuse to line up on the "progressive" side on abortion, contraception and euthanasia – preferring the modern gospel of death to the glorious life of the Christian Church. Modern secular Europe has thus declared war on its own inheritance.

Today's influential people think that our society can prosper without sure faith and absolute morals. But:

*Do you need to be told that whatever has been can still be?
Do you need to be told that even such modest achievements
As you can boast in the way of polite society
Will hardly survive the Faith to which they owe their significance?*

Well that's telling 'em, Rector! But I'm not telling *them*. I'm telling you and I'm telling myself. The nation, the City, the parish is only the people within it. The nation is not going to recover its wits while you insist on losing yours. The Christian faith will only be restored by individual men and women returning to God – not in their heads, as if God were only the old-fashioned name of some grand abstraction. The Christian faith will be restored only when we get down on our knees; when we lift up our hearts.

We must simply believe the faith and live it practically every day. And cheer up – I've told you before this is not like bending over to receive your punishment from the headmaster. It's not an arid list of *Thou shalt not*. Here's what God is offering you: companionship and friendship with him. If you ask God he will give you the comfort of his presence. You should ask God to make you want him and desire him, to love him, serve him and obey him. You should ask God to re-centre your life with him at the centre.

And it happens. It works. Do this and God will come and make his dwelling with you and your life will be transformed. And you enter into the glorious liberty of the Sons of God. Life abundant. The joy of living. And that joy full.

The call is to prayer and devotion. The reward is happiness. The assurance of God's presence. Walking always with God at your side. O for a closer walk with God...