

Sermon: Trial by Fire 15th October 2006...

The Bishop of London, the Archdeacon and I were in bed in France – not the same bed you understand, but adjacent. This was last week on a clergy conference in Merville in the old seminary now the conference centre for the diocese of Lille. I was asleep at one o'clock in the morning when the alarm went and voices shouting, *There's a fire. Get out! Get out!* I blearily got half-dressed and opened the door. The corridor was filled with smoke. I ran down the three flights of steps and joined the others on the lawn. Five minutes later the French equivalent of the Trumptonshire fire engine arrived and a wholesale conflagration was averted.

In his talk to the conference, Richard Chartres told us what had happened. He said it was a good job he was a vigilant bishop and only half asleep, or he would not have noticed the smoke pouring from a cupboard in the corner of his room. He got out of bed and saw that this cupboard containing the water heater was ablaze and sounded the alarm. He spoke apocalyptically of *the fire in the closet*.

The conference was about urban ministry, and the main part of the discussion was on the church's response to terrorist atrocities, such as happened in London last year when we were all deployed at the scenes of the explosions. And we also talked about the possibility of interfaith dialogue. Some American clergy involved in the 9/11 attack in New York told us of their experience. And they handed out a glossy brochure they had produced called *New York Disaster Interfaith Services*.

Here we learnt a whole new vocabulary of *unmet needs roundtables; mapped vulnerabilities; networking to convene leadership and facilitate the delivery of services to underserved victims and impacted communities*. I tell you, if Osama bin Laden were susceptible to volleys of bureaucratic jargon, he would be a dead duck by now. But all the time I was reading this stuff, I kept thinking of the fire in the closet.

It was all jargon. Even in the loo, in French. You stand there and read the notice that says *Ne pas oublier d'appuyer sur le bouton ci-dessous afin d'actionner la chasse d'eau*. Or, as we say in English, *Flush!* A German spoke for an hour like Professor Teufelsdröckh and actually said *Twenty-thirdly*. Then one of the Americans spoke for the next hour, telling us that the chief sins in America are *poverty, racism and sexism*. I confess I still don't understand how these can be described as sins instead of as consequences. He told us merrily that the American clergy were trained in *multiple sensitivity and sexual identity*. Obviously, this *multiple sensitivity* did not include sensitivity to the English language. He ended by telling us *I have learnt to be myself*. And I wondered what was the point of that.

Not to be outdone by mere foreigners, the English clergy soon demonstrated that we are not easily surpassed in the matter of jargon. We were told all about how to *energise, enable through models* to deal with *bereavement issues* by means of *paradigms, objectives, systems, methodology, diversity, dissemination* and of course *sharing with you*. One priest admitted shamefacedly *I am not a qualified counsellor* – which made me wonder what his theological training had been all about. You wanted to escape to the chapel and say your prayers. But the worship was the worst of it.

One priest began the prayers by saying, *Let us pray around the theme of hate. Think of a person in your parish whom you hate. Perhaps you hate yourself? Or you hate God?* In the debased canticles we changed *forefathers* into *ancestors* – as if ancestor worship were the coming thing in the C.of E. There were huge dollops of touchy feely and the explicit hatred of tradition. For instance in the hymn we sang, *Preaching Christ and not our customs, let us build a bridge of care.* See the contempt there for our customs. But what if Christ is mediated precisely through our customs?

There were vacuous choruses - the eleven-fold repetition of what was not worth singing once. All to dreamily mothballed tunes of the Joan Baez version of 1960s nostalgia. Pools of sentimentality. And then the feminisation of the church which has followed so swiftly on women's ordination: we prayed to the Holy Ghost as *Tender sister* The climax was an act of such stultifying banality that it made you wish you hadn't come. It was called *the symbolic response*.

We all had to leave our pews and be given a little night-light style candle and put them on the floor of the chapel to form the shape of the Cross. All the time the creepy goo of the chorus droning on and on. Grown men, priests for God's sake, shuffling themselves into this mullarkey. It reminded me of *Blue Peter* and I wondered whether we were going to be shown how to make an Archdeacon out of egg boxes. And always at the back of my mind was the fire in the closet.

Of course when we went back into the conference sessions I knew what the fire in the closet really is. Western European civilisation is decadent, perhaps beyond recovery. We inhabit a shallow consumerism, a materialistic obsession, a universal market of flesh, drugs and public debauchery all to the background of the dead metal beat of a sickening pop culture: the death rattle of the European millennium, strangled by relativism and totalitarian political correctness.

And we are faced with militant religious Islam. Never mind the terrorists, millions of decent practising Muslims look at our decayed western civilisation and wish to recapture it for God. Islam is a serious religion. Muslims are called to pray five times a day; to attend the mosque and listen to erudite sermons and lectures; to fast during the hours of daylight for a whole month each year; to dress modestly and to be faithful in sexual morality. Given population trends, comparative birth-rates, immigration and conversions to Islam, Europe will be distinctively Muslim in thirty years time.

Against this what does the Christian Church appear to be doing? Compromising with the anything-goes sexual immorality; incorporating the nauseating popular culture into its dumbed down liturgy; barely half believing the doctrines of the Creed; inviting its members to the empty-headed choruses and the banalities and jiggery-pokery of worship. A sentimental, infantilised Dianafication parody of religious life. How can we expect this shambolic trivialisation of the Christian Faith to resist the Muslim determination to recapture Europe for God? What do we say – come and sing our jogging-for-Jesus choruses and act daft in church with us?

There are prophets in this wasteland. The President of the Italian Senate says this:

A foul wind is blowing through Europe. This same wind blew through Munich in 1938. While the wind might sound like a sigh of relief, it is really a shortness of

breath. It could turn out to be the death rattle of a continent that no longer understands what principles to believe and consequently mixes everything together in a rhetorical hodgepodge.

He suggests the only remedy:

Will the Church, the clergy and the faithful be able to and want to be purified of the relativism that has almost erased their identity and weakened their message and witness?

There was much talk on my conference of *The London Challenge*. I don't want you to think of this challenge as being to *them* in the church hierarchy, to some *system*, to some central church authority to do something about our desperate predicament. The challenge is to us. If European civilisation, which is consubstantial with Christianity, is to be saved, then you and I, all of us in this church, and all the others you must bring with you into this church, must get serious about the practice of our faith: become more informed, devout and affectionate for Christ

There is not much time left. There is a fire in the closet.