

Sermon, The Christian faith, the mass media and communication 29th Jan 2006

I was brought up in a great chaos of words over my grandad's shop. We had books: *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer*. Grandad didn't read the Bible much. He seemed to have it all in his head and he would spit bits out *How are the mighty fallen and weapons of war perished. Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in Philistia, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice*. But he would say such things with a *Park Drive* cigarette in his mouth, the ash longer than the cigarette so that it looked like a conjuring trick. He was a newsagent and he would be counting out the morning papers. *Count them in sixes and stack them in quires. And Adam heard the voice of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day*.

My grandma was the same and thirty years later she frightened Bishop David Stancliffe, the Chairman of the Liturgical Commission, on *The Today Programme*. John Timpson or Brian Redhead asked Bishop Stancliffe why he was chucking out *The Book of Common Prayer* and replacing it with some unreadable grunge called *The Alternative Service Book* – or words to that effect. And the Bishop replied that *Book of Common Prayer was beyond ordinary people's parameters of discourse*. When asked, I was rude enough to say that my grandma left school aged twelve and didn't know anything about the parameters of discourse but that she taught me so I knew by heart all the Collects from the old *Prayer Book*. Bishop Stancliffe ran off and didn't come back.

There was secular literature over the shop as well. Grandad had a complete first edition of Dickens and we got chunks of that recited too while he took his daily *Epsom Salts: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness*. Don't know what became of that set of Dickens when granddad died – though my mother said *It'll be that brother of mine that's got 'em*. This was uncle Bill, the regimental sergeant major who spoke eight languages and was learning Russian in his last days, dying of lung cancer.

A great chaos of words sacred and profane all mixed up. These words weren't made to march in lines as if they were in a university department of literature – those places Blake was talking about when he said *dark satanic mills*. The words in that shop in those days were falling all over the place, like dolly mixtures out of a lucky bag.

I read all the newspapers and the comics and, after that it had ceased to be with me after the manner of a child, such glories as *Titbits*, *Reveille* and the one they put on the top shelf – *A Basinful of Fun*. The newspapers were different in those days. Only *The News of the World* went in for filth and pornography and even its prurience was circumspect, almost literary: *The Scoutmaster accompanied the lad to the hut where, it is alleged, the indecent act took place*. What *The News of the World* related with all circumspection in the 1950s, *The Times* and *The Telegraph* now proffer blatantly, titillating, with pictures. And the telly does worse on its nuts 'n' sluts shows and on that modern version of the Colosseum, *Celebrity Big Brother*.

But let's leave the mass media at its worst and look instead at its best. Let's consider the more serious programmes such as *Newsnight* and the informed comment on *Radio Four*. Let's consider *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *The Telegraph*. Even at their best they are vastly incompetent.

Never mind Sophocles and Shakespeare, the BBC thinks a *tragedy* is a whale stuck in The Thames. Sky think a *tragedy* is what happens when Rooney gets sent off. They say *begs the question* when they mean *asks a question*. They don't know the difference between *refute* and *repudiate*. They are so damned brave they daren't say *dying* and have to say *terminally ill* instead. Highly paid journalists and editors say *I was sat* and *I was stood*. They say *rise to a crescendo* because they don't know what a crescendo is. They say *mitigate against* and *bored of* and *centred around*. They say *flaunt* when they mean *flout*.

When you put this to them, they say it doesn't matter because it's only words and words are always changing. But it does matter because the precise choice of words determines what is being said. Journalists of all people ought to know about words. Once, that august organ of progressive ideas *The Guardian* wanted to tell us that other workers were coming out on strike in solidarity with the miners. What they wrote in the paper was that the new strike *would add impetus to the stoppage*. I tell you, they don't have the literary competence of my grandmother. They don't even have the literary competence of the Chairman of the Liturgical Commission.

And this is the best of them. Let's not go too deeply into their advice columns on how to treat yourself with Bach Flowers and alternative remedies for imaginary diseases; or, after you've read your horoscope, how to give your house a Feng Shui makeover – so you achieve the right Chi. Let's even discount the incoherence in the BBC's deploring of murder and violence against women with the rave reviews it gave to gangsta rap in the new film *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. Let's not dwell on the media's demonising of paedophiles alongside its television programmes that sexualise children. Forget all that for now, and just understand this: the mass media is a far more subtle enemy of the Christian Faith.

It blasphemes Christianity everywhere – while sucking up horribly to other religions. A Christian home was somewhere children were taught virtues and learnt to love. *Big Brother House* is an explicit denial of all values and the parody of love: *Pretend to worship a cat. Fornicate and be filmed doing it*. Just like the amphitheatre.

Radio and Television obscure the Christian faith even on the so called religious programmes. *Songs of Praise* is no more than a sentimental jamboree. The daily and Sunday broadcast services are no more than the advertisement of fashionable secular values: fair trade, foreign aid, equal opportunities, non-discrimination, social paternalism and of course the repeated insistence that all religions and spiritual attitudes are equal. They wilfully ignore the notion of truth, and the consequence: that where there is no truth the people perish. Recently the BBC was considering having secular speakers on *Thought for the Day*. Is this some sort of joke? There's not a clergyperson, imam, rabbi or guru who comes on that programme now and says anything other than secular platitudes, only dressed up in the colourful regalia of his particular sect.

The agenda of the mass media is secular progressivism. And they think this is how it should be. While deploring all things doctrinal and dogmatic, they don't understand that secular progressivism is itself an ideology, a dogma – a bias. Often this bias is very explicit: the Dawkins programmes rubbishing religion of any sort; Starkey

rubbishing Christian history; Peter Ackroyd's *The Romantics* firmly on the side of Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot and the young William "turnips" Wordsworth; and the 18th century church identified with the forces of darkness and repression. Then there's that new historical drama about Queen Elizabeth I – where she rushes out of the Tower of London into a glorious meadow, just like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. In this programme it was made quite clear that the religious controversy was a bit of primitive nonsense beside what they think history is really about: frocks and forsooth and a royal bit on the side.

But God forbid that I should end on what the media would describe as something *negative* – though Christians are brought up to understand that to destroy lies and evil is an act of creation. The global mass media give us great opportunities for the advancement of the faith.

We have a couple of hundred people fairly closely attached to St Michael's. I want to bring in hundreds more. But we are also missionaries to a far greater number through our publications and our website. There are groups in this country and in the United States who use sermons and lectures on our site for their study and devotional meetings. Surely we are being asked by God to make use of this ministry? I need you to help me with this. For when it comes to operating gadgets and setting up technological thingummies, your parish priest is back in the stone age.

If we live in an age of electronic globalisation, then we need to use these new media, to Christianise them in seeking to obey Our Lord's commandment for us to go into all the world and make men his disciples. In the 16th Century, Christians took advantage of the new printing press to preach the gospel. We must take hold of the Internet and the email to do the same. The people need Our Lord Jesus Christ...his truth to save them; the Sacrament of his Body and Blood to nurture them

But how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?

We are all missionaries now.