

Sermon: Epiphany III The Enemy Within

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places – Ephesians 6:2

I want to try to understand the forces that are arraigned against the Christian faith and then I want to try to outline what we can do to defeat these forces. Last week we celebrated the New Year City Service in St Michael's. More than three hundred people attended and the great majority of them joined heartily in the traditional prayers and hymns and were thrilled and encouraged by the Service. A very small number hated every minute of it; and a few of them told me so.

They hated the hymn *I Vow To Thee My Country* which they dismissed as jingoistic. They hated the State Prayers. But more than anything else they hated the second verse of the National Anthem: the verse where we sing and pray that God will frustrate the knavish tricks of the Queen's enemies and confound their politics. One man approached me in the loo at Drapers' Hall and objected vigorously to this verse. I replied, *If you think the Queen has no enemies, look no further than the boss of Harrods, the BBC and the Murdoch Press.*

But it was the particular nature of that man's objection which interested me. He said, *We shouldn't be singing verses like that these days.* Again, I asked him, *Why not? What's changed?* Upstairs at the buffet luncheon, senior cathedral clergymen vehemently criticised the Service. One said, *If that's what you call Real Religion, I dissociate my self from it completely*

This is the problem. For forty years those who have ruled the Church – most of the Bishops and the General Synod – share views and opinions which are the very opposite of Christian understanding. They believe that humankind has changed: more precisely, they believe that humankind has progressed. So certain attitudes and beliefs ought no longer to be held and expressed. Let me offer just a few examples.

They are against the nation state and prefer internationalism. They do not accept the traditional understanding of sin. So they expunge from their new prayer books all those stern old words which speak of *men as brute beasts with no understanding* and the truth that *all men are conceived and born into sin*. They no longer use the expression *miserable sinners*. They don't mention *the devil and all his works*.

In other words these modern churchmen must believe that the biblical writers and the saints and doctors of the Church were wrong to impute sin and evil to the hearts and affections of mankind. Either that, or they believe that there has been some very recent and quite astonishing improvement in human nature, so that we are no longer as bad as we were. Well, do they really want to say that Moses and Jesus and St Paul were wrong about human nature and that they, the moderns, know better? They shy away from saying this directly. So if you challenge them they will say such as *Jesus and the biblical writers were men of their time*. The inescapable implication of course is that our times are much better, that we are more enlightened.

Now I have spent forty years asking these senior churchmen, the man in the Drapers' loo, the cosy ecclesiastical snobs at the luncheon, one question. *Look around the world please and show me some evidence for this doctrine of progress.* We look at the wars and genocides of the last hundred years: the purges and the holocausts in Europe. We look at social disorder and moral turpitude in British society – drugs, violent crime, wholesale fornication, abortion as a means of contraception, the breakdown of the family, greed, and the degenerate voyeurism of the celebrity culture, the moral filth of *Big Brother*.

Is this a society which can really claim *nothing to acknowledge, nothing to bewail*? Are the words from the Litany *envy, hatred and malice* out of date? Is there no longer any *fornication and deadly sin*? And let me ask another question of the slick progressives and the cosy ecclesiastical snobs: *If there is no personal sin, if the heart of man is no longer wicked, what need have we of the Redeemer?* Because these modern churchmen have no sense of evil and sin, it follows that their view of Jesus Christ and his purpose to redeem sinners must be wrong too. And this is what we find in their modern hymns and prayers: they are only sentimental, pretend religion, cheap grace.

At the heart of this fraud, this scandal, this treason of the clerks, there is a fundamental contradiction, a massive illogicality. For while they have no time for the doctrine of individual sin, they revel in the idea of the collective – just like the socialists and the communists. So they turn a blind eye to personal evil and insist instead that we all labour under a colossal burden of corporate guilt. But guilt for what? The answer is of course the great nebulosities: world poverty, global warming, racism and all the other fictions invented to distract us from our personal shortcomings.

Let us go back to our man in the Drapers' loo and the Pelagians at the luncheon. What really enrages them – as I found out – what they really can't abide is that we are still here. Old fashioned, traditional Christianity was supposed to have faded away, to be replaced by their modern enlightenment. We aren't supposed to be here any longer. But just look – we are here and more vigorous than ever. This is what infuriates the modern churchmen, especially as it is their modern, progressed and enlightened church which is failing everywhere. By contrast, those churches which use the old Bible and Prayer Book are thriving. All those churches which believe and profess traditional Christian faith are alive and full – whether Evangelical, Catholic or Orthodox.

To rephrase Algernon Charles Swinburne: *They have conquered these pale modern churchmen; and the church has grown grey from their breath.* There they are, the liberal, progressive churchmen, at last they have succeeded in capturing the governing heights of the hierarchy. They are the masters now. And nobody takes any notice of them. No wonder they are so furious with us. We were supposed to die out in a generation and yet here we are, the only place where the church is strong.

The English writer T.E. Hulme remarked in 1916:

An institution is not beaten until it accepts into itself the ideas of its enemies. We have played with these to our own undoing. Not until we are hardened again by conviction

are we likely to do any good. In accepting the theories of the other side, we are merely repeating a well-known historical phenomenon. The Revolution in France came about not so much because the forces which should have resisted were half-hearted in their resistance. They themselves had been conquered intellectually by the theories of the revolutionary side. An institution is beaten only when it has lost faith in itself, when it has been penetrated by the ideas that are working against it.

And this is what has happened to the modern church. In the 1960s, instead of resisting the secularising notions of modernity, the church adopted these ideas as its own. The result has been a debacle, a catastrophe for the church. The modern churches have emptied. But whatever did they expect would happen? When you abandon traditional doctrine, you must expect the people to abandon the pews. No wonder they burn within themselves, these moderns. No wonder their disappointment and anger spills over into petulance as it did at the Drapers' luncheon.

But we *are* still here, here with a vengeance. Christian truth will not be overthrown. We have Our Lord's promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. What is required of us then is only that we stand fast, immovable, cheerful and confident in our faith: vigorous, claiming the faith and the church for our own and practising what we preach.