

Sermon: Christianity & Contemporary Society

If you look at this week's Newsletter you will see that September sermons will feature the central and formative part which the Christian faith plays in our lives together. And today I want us to think about Christianity and modern society. Where better to start than at an airport hotel. I spent one night in such a place on holiday in Yorkshire last week. This represented a great broadening of my education, for I had never stayed in an airport hotel before.

There were five hundred rooms – but not so much rooms as capsules. It was like entering one of those whole-body scanners they have at the hospital. When I sat on the loo, my knees touched the door. And I hardly dared push the shiny futuristic FLUSH button for fear of being shot into space.

Then I went looking for the bar. Every time you turned a corner in the maze of identical corridors you ran into a posse of geriatric clones. They loomed frighteningly, swaying slowly from side to side. I thought of *Night of the Living Dead* or worse, the national convention of the Prayer book Society. These lumbering oldies actually resembled the youngsters in that they had writing on their clothes They were looking for food and drink...then more food and more drink. They were all over the bar and their sparkling conversation was mostly about places they had been to where you could eat till you were sick for one-pound-fifty.

The restaurant was serve-yourself and the so called food was set out in dazzlingly lit turrines. Illuminated chickens, for example. I tell you, those chickens enjoyed more spotlight than any bird since Gipsy Rose Lee. Actually, I chose the chicken myself, which came in something like a paint-stripper sauce. At the table next to me were two ample young ladies eating everything. One looked rather like John Prescott and the other was a dead ringer for Les Dawson. They were also drinking suicidally, indiscriminately, pints of lager and *Guinness and* a bottle of white wine.

The Les Dawson one bent over (with an oath) to retrieve her gong-sized earring and revealed an acre or so of tattooed backside. It said *Jo and Dekka* between the top end of her exposed pink knicker-line and what might euphemistically be called the small of her back. From their conversation it seemed they were heading for Tenerife. When I was leaving, I said, *Have a nice time in Tenerife ladies!*

One of them grinned and replied: *We don't care where we're (expletive deleted) going, darlin'. We're just going to get (expletive deleted) p****d!*

What I'd walked into in that airport hotel was a sample of the coarseness which spoils much of British society. Of course it's not all like that – not in the countryside where I'd spent the first part of the week. But public life in the streets in our towns and cities *is* like that – crude, blatant, horrific and disgraceful. Just go as far as the Tottenham Court Road and there they all are, the living dead in their designer trainers, slouching along slurping at a can, throwing their fast-food wrappers in the road.

And our society is not only coarse: it is infantilised. Everywhere individuals hypnotised into senescence by small hi tech gadgets – babbling mindlessness into their mobile phones, texting one another obsessively, listening to audible filth on their

Ipods. Children who can't get up for school in the mornings because they've been transfixed by the playstation all night. So we have this combination of coarseness and childish self-indulgence. It's not a happy combination: naked greed and an insatiable desire for trivial, instant satisfactions. Like spoilt children, they want *everything* and they want it *now*.

Of course most of these overindulged yobs and oiks don't go in for stabbing people or shooting them. But the coarse, pig philosophy – the gimme lifestyle - they create and inhabit provides the ideal foundation for a culture of insensitivity, rudeness, and a radical selfishness which is apt to turn violent when denied or challenged. How many incidents there have been recently of spoilt yobs and oiks beating to death civilised people who seek to restrain them! The whole scene is made ten times worse by the fact that so many of the underclass are out of it on drink and drugs.

The aggressive, violent culture is not tamed by schooling – quite the opposite: it is encouraged. Those who run the schools are like the 1950s curate with his motorbike and guitar trying to get well-in with the Teddy Boys. Teachers and others in authority find they can't compete with the technologically advanced gadgets and games of the yob culture – so they give in and imitate it. Only this week it was reported that children in GCSE exams were turning in illiterate essays filled with what was described as *sickening violence and torture* – because the examiners had asked them to write on the subject *Assassin*. This is education as video nasty. Are we surprised things are so bad?

Every now and again something happens so terrible that even society's numbed responses are outraged – the most recent the ride-by shooting of eleven-year-old Rhees Jones. And this is precisely when our resources – social, political and spiritual – are exposed as useless. And the whole ragbag of useless solutions is rehearsed again. We must have *better role models* or *more facilities* and *more bobbies on the beat*. A few even start talking about *corporal punishment*. All useless. Nothing makes any difference.

And yet society is made up of human beings and when something dreadful happens we need to give vent to our feelings. And the only way this happens nowadays – always happens – is in a great outpouring of sentimentality. Floral tributes by the million. Football teams gushing mawkishness. Emotional incontinence. The whole population whipped up by the newspapers and the telly to express feelings they couldn't possibly have. You might call it *The Diana Syndrome* – by which a man from Mars would conclude that the favourite exercise of the British people is to watch celebrity funerals on TV, breaking off now and again to rush out and throw Teddy Bears at passing hearses.

What we are seeing is a society which has lost its wits and lost its nerve because it has given up its Christian Faith. For a thousand years the Christian Faith taught us how to think and how to feel and how to behave. Chivalry, manners, courtesy, self-restraint, postponed gratification, service of others, examination of one's conscience; confession, repentance, decency, cleanliness and the ordered life – these all have their origin in Christianity.

The mistake made by the secular world was to think that it could abandon Christianity yet all these good things would somehow remain anyway. They won't. They don't. I will quote Mr Eliot at you again: *Do you think such modest achievements as you can boast in the way of polite society will survive the Faith to which they owe their significance?*

So what is required is our return to the Faith. I'm not talking about moralising and *back to basics*, draconian punishments and putting people in the stocks. I'm talking about the need for Christian formation. The Bible tells us that God made man in his own image. We are to seek to nurture that image in ourselves, and it is our special duty to nurture it in our offspring. This is Christian formation. The imitation of Christ. To form and reform ourselves in the image and likeness of himself which God shows us.

It must be done in the home, in the schools and in the churches. But how – when we have so debauched our spiritual understanding that more than half the population doesn't even know the Lord's Prayer? When it is actually forbidden by law to teach in our schools that Christianity is true? When the church has spent the last forty years ditching the real Bible and the real Prayer Book and the bishops fall over themselves to deny the miracles and the Resurrection?

So now what is left to us is judgement. Judgement is not fire and brimstone from heaven. We have manufactured our own fire and brimstone by deserting the Faith. *Here* is the judgement. *These* are the consequences of our own actions. Just look around. There is only one comfort. God has promised that however bad things get, he will not leave himself without witnesses. Here in St Michael's today we are bearing witness to these things. Don't despair. Remember: *ours is only the trying: the rest is not our business....*