

Sermon: The culture of a people is the incarnation of its religion – T.S. Eliot

Going on holiday is interesting for that it exposes you to bits of life that you don't normally come across. The aeroplane was an instruction for a start. In front of us a couple fortyish and of a particular vintage. He in a shell suit, staring about him quietly, gleeful and furtive. I thought he looked pleased with himself - as The Bishop of Southwark might look if he'd just come across another parked car full of kids' toys. She in something loose and indiscriminate at the bottom, revealing glimpses of parts we aren't meant to see; and at the top all straps and voluminous blouse blowing around like an ill-rigged sailing ship in a storm at sea.

They shout. Their accents are *EastEnders* meet *Sex and the City*. In the aeroplane one of their children plays for hours closing and unclosing the window shutter with a clatter. Unrebuked, of course. The other two children shriek everlastingly and climb up over the back of the seat all the time. Daddy shell suit's response to this is interesting. He does not himself urge them to desist but threatens them with the air steward: *If you stay up there. He'll tell you off next time he comes through*. Nothing outstandingly freakish about all this: just the standard Neanderthal aspect of public life today.

It rained for the first two days and I took the opportunity to look at *Crimewatch* on television. Sex and violence and titillation under the pretence of serving the public good. A strange mixture of sentimentality and sadomasochism. Murders and rapes brutally and cheerfully re-enacted as entertainment. At least the Roman circus didn't pretend its filth was for public edification. Nick Clarke, with a pained but gloating look introduced items by saying, *There are no words to describe etc*. And then went into reams of prurient description. Everyone – victims, perverts, witnesses alike – were called *guys* – the verbal equivalent of denims. *Guys* is used everywhere, have you noticed? It is particularly favoured by the modern types because it removes every shard of dignity, rank and respect due to the human person. A kind of amoral equivalence. *A regular kinda guy*

All this sordid stuff orchestrated to clichés. A young murder victim was obviously described as someone *who wouldn't harm anyone, and with all his life before him*. Murdered children are always *bright, lovely, bubbly*. Fiona Bruce came on dressed in shiny black leathers – like a poor man's Diana Rigg – but wielding a crowbar. Exhibit "A" How the newspapers and TV loved the missing girl in the Algarve. Nothing so juicy since Holly and Jessica. Child abduction (with lurid conjecture) and parental grief as a spectator sport.

You might wonder what these things have to do with a sermon, with all of us here in church today. These things are important because they are examples of social behaviour. Our behaviour taken altogether is our culture. And as Eliot said, *The culture of a people is the incarnation of its religion*. What we do as a people – and how we do it – shows what we value. And the things we value define our worth.

It doesn't have to be a Christian culture or society to be half decent. Even the pagan Greeks regarded public space as sacred space. But public life and public space in Britain today are soulless and depraved. The streets littered. The slouching mob hideous, eating unspeakably, throwing down its food wrappings. Every other word a

profanity. Every glance a scowl of aggression. I look around at the public realm and those awful words of W.B. Yeats come rolling back:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
The best lack all conviction while the worst
Are full of a passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand...
...And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

Everything to the backdrop of a diseased blast of pop music. Everything. Put on the gardening programme or the wildlife documentary and it is there. Contamination. Pandemic. I picked up a serious newspaper and found the fine cellist Julian Lloyd Webber complaining that classical music has been sidelined to make way for this evil. And he gave as an example the way that the death of Rostropovich was all but ignored by the mass media. But when the nonentity John Peel died the BBC went into audible black armbands for a fortnight.

Now the point of this is that Julian's protest was itself sidelined – a tiny piece at the edge of the page and surrounded by four pages of depravity: BRITPOP GIRL SAYS I COULD HAVE ENDED UP IN REHAB – her photo alone bigger than Julian's column – and ARE YOUR EARS BLEEDING YET? BY FANS OF NOISE PUTTING FIVE STRANGERS ON THE ROUTE TO GLASTONBURY. This is not some odious rag of a newspaper like *The Daily Bonk*. This is what *The Daily Telegraph* describes as its music coverage

One hundred million people watch *The Eurovision Sing Contest* making it the biggest world TV audience after.... You guessed it, football. The mindless culture of celebs. The noise universal. The clothing hideous with crude advertising slogans. An untaught, unemployable, sullen, resentful and violent underclass – because we have abdicated responsibility. A government that trumpets its greatest achievement as giving in to all the demands of Irish terrorists and honouring the Brighton bomber with a programme on the BBC.

G.K. Chesterton prophesied all this long ago when he said: *A people that does not believe in God does not believe in nothing. It believes in anything.* And this is the society we now inhabit. A superstitious pantomime of diets and detox, fads and lifestyle. But watch your back – for behind it is the sinister testimony of universal CCTV and planning for the identity card. Big Brother is alive and well and living in England.

What we have fallen into now is what the Old Testament prophets described as *whoring after strange gods*. Our way of life today is exactly what they condemned as idolatry. The worship of images. Our culture is all image and no reality.

What we have lost is standards of judgement – the courage to praise and celebrate what is good and to reprove what is bad. And so we have lost our powers of discrimination. *Discrimination* these days is only a dirty word – like *elitism*. We have lost courtesy, politeness, etiquette, forbearance, manners, criteria in art and standards in morality – all the things that belong to our peace. And so most terribly we have lost our sense of the presence of God; God whom to love and adore is the whole duty of man. We have driven him from us by our depravity.

When we come to this awful condition we are on the edge of judgement as Yeats said in that poem. We are on the edge of catastrophe and destruction. This will not be dealt out to us by an angry god upstairs. By our words and deeds we judge ourselves. Any civilisation can fight against external enemies and repel them. No civilisation can survive its own decadence. The answer is what it always was: *Repent*. This is a Greek word μετανοια. It means *Rethink. Change your mind. Step back. Turn around. Think again*. For God's sake, let us think again...