

I wonder if you ever get to that stage where you conclude that if things get much worse our society and civilization will be in serious trouble? Well, I confess I have. But then I read something far more chilling. The words are by R.G. Collingwood, one of the greatest and most inventive thinkers of the last century:

Civilisations sometimes perish because they are forcibly broken up by the armed attack of enemies without or revolutionaries within; but never from this cause alone. Such attacks never succeed unless the thing that is attacked is weakened by doubt as to whether the end which it sets before itself, the form of life which it tries to realize, is worth achieving. On the other hand, this doubt is quite capable of destroying a civilization without any help whatever. If the people who share a civilization are no longer on the whole convinced that the form of life which it tries to realize is worth realizing, nothing can save it.

What we are faced with is the threatened death of a civilisation. Civilisations die and are born not with the waving of flags or the noise of machine guns in the streets, but in the dark, in a stillness, when no-one is aware of it. It never gets into the papers. Long afterwards we look back and notice that it was predicted by a very few individuals

Of course, these individuals were ignored as crackpots. It seems to me that we have passed the point of reversible decline and are indeed descended to that condition where we no longer have the will to preserve the civil society, the forms of life which have sustained us for centuries – that is for the Christian centuries. Where's the evidence?

Let's start at the bottom, with the politicians. Our politicians – with some notable exceptions – have been revealed as self-seeking and on the make. And it is no use that they or anyone else suggest a new *system* to regulate their expenses. A system is only ever as good as the people who operate it. The tragedy - and here the word is being used rarely in its proper sense – is that there should not be the need for such a system. The whole point is that our politicians are no longer educated in civic values, civility, forms of conduct which were recognisable to Wellington, Pitt, Gladstone and Disraeli; and even recently to such as Harold Macmillan and Jim Callaghan. Public morality – civility – is something that has to be taught and learnt. What are these values? What does *civility* mean? Let me quote Collingwood again:

Behaving civilly to a man means respecting his feelings; abstaining from shocking him, annoying him, frightening him or arousing in him any passion or desire which might diminish his self-respect.

Civilization depends also, and crucially, on the general capacity for sound judgement in the forms and sorts of social behaviour we deem acceptable and which promote civility. When we

see, as I saw in Salisbury last weekend, the town centre a no-go area for civilized society, we see an example of civilization as having broken down. And what goes for Salisbury goes for all the other town centres and even for the City of London. Hordes of half-dressed young men and women out of their minds on drink and drugs, pursuing one another in raucous displays of pretentious lust, shouting, screaming and chanting obscenities, and pausing only for long enough to vomit and urinate in shop-doorways. I do not blame them. I blame my generation for its failure of nerve and its cowardice for allowing this to happen: that is failing to inculcate habits of civility into the children for whom we are responsible.

Chesterton warns us not to *stretch the folly of our youth to be the shame of age*. In other words, there are things we must grow out of. But we don't. When Michael Jackson died, television and all the newspapers described him as *one of the greatest singers ever*. This is a ridiculous judgement, a failure of judgement. Gigli, Caruso, Maria Callas, Kathleen Ferrier – these are a few candidates off the top of my head who might qualify for the appellation *great singer*. By contrast Michael Jackson was an hysterical, twitching, dithyrambic marionette: the whitened face of the clown in the funeral parlour: Grand Guignol: the frenetic emblem of the culture of death. I recall one particularly sulphuric scene: Jacko dancing, grabbing his crotch, on a stage full of people dressed as undead zombies. A high proportion of his audience about ten years old.

Journalists and commentators who are supposed to be grown up, mature enough to mediate – that's what *media* is for – truth and sound judgement persisted in this disgusting deification of Jackson for days on end when he was always first item in the news. For days and days the only news was MICHAEL JACKSON: STILL DEAD. Four days after his death, I sat through fifteen minutes of this necromantic sycophancy on the ten o'clock news before the real news of the day got a mention: the fact that nine British workers had been taken hostage in Teheran. That order of perspective represented the devaluation of all values.

Coincidentally over the same weekend, we learnt that the BBC had sent 407 of its staff to report on the drugs, mud and noise festival at Glastonbury – all part of the aesthetically-bankrupt and malevolent insistence by the whole media that there is no qualitative difference between rock music and real music. When a civilization has died, true judgement dies with it. As today's Collect says: *O God, without whom nothing*. We are worshipping *nothingness* and elevating trash. This is the meaning of idolatry. And the people who were appointed to guard our values are precisely those who everywhere betray them. The culture wars have been lost. What we have now is the triumph of the voyeuristic, pop, fashion and celebrity culture. As Gertrud Himmelfarb said: *The counter culture IS the culture now*

We used to have institutions to defend us against decadence: among them, parliament and education. But now parliament is the plaything of the prime minister's ruling clique and the schools are a disgrace.

Whenever a few people – crackpots? - talk like this - because they have noticed that things have gone horribly wrong – they are dismissed as out of touch, miseries, pessimists, negative. Well, they used to stone the prophets: now they just write them off, ignore them, mock them as *uncool*. Particularly, they say, Christians of all people should have hope. But Eliot tells us how, *I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope: For hope would be hope for the wrong thing*. The church has its own misplaced hope, for even the church itself has joined the counter culture. And those who were ordained and appointed to preserve the beauty of holiness, reverence, spiritual intelligence and holy fear, have turned the church into a shambolic pantomime, an idiotic imitation of the nihilistic secular culture of *acquisitiveness, celebrity, therapy and monstrosity*.

Collingwood defines our tragedy for us:

We have entrusted the conservation of our own traditions to a class of persons who, owing to their position, have not the power to conserve them. By doing this we have put ourselves as much at a disadvantage as compared with peoples we call BARBAROUS, as if we were a tribe which threw away the paddles of its war canoes, set sail, and employed crews of professional medicine-men to whistle for a wind.

We have been at this tragic point, at the collapse of civilization, many times. The answer is not to accommodate ourselves to the surrounding barbarism but to seek places and pursue actions which are the antidote to it. This happened in the 4th century at the end of the Roman Empire. Christians and others of insight, who could see the collapse for what it was, collected themselves in small groups and prayed, and practised the faith, finding their true hope not in hideous compromise with the culture of death, but in God; and preserving in their hearts words which can – because they are of God – serve and restore. I uphold St Michael's as such a place. For here we preserve the words and Sacraments of eternal life

I sat upon the shore fishing, with the arid plain behind me. Shall I at least set my lands in order? London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down...O swallow, swallow. Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie. Hieronymo's mad againe. These fragments have I shored against my ruins

The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

