

## Sermon Easter II      Christianity and Culture

I gave up listening to *The Archers* when it ceased to be about the discovery of pig iron on Blakey Hill and started to be about multi-ethnic obsessions from the pulpit of the lady vicar. It seems all my old friends are dying off, metaphorically. I have just had to give up on what used to be a delightful radio quiz, just right for doing the washing up to after lunch: *Counterpoint*. Last week was the last travesty. The choices of questions were *Bruckner and Mahler; Music and the Monarchy* or *The Bee Gees*. No doubt in weeks to come there will be choices between *Bach* and *The Rolling Stones*.

It is a disgrace that the broadcasters should spit on our culture and civilisation in this way. Bruckner and *The Bee Gees* are not like with like. You might as well offer the category *food* and then tell your listeners that of course this will include *poisons*.

I turned from this latest falling off, this iconoclastic dumbing down and the abdication of all critical judgement to read the newspaper which reported that *Libraries are no longer just for books*. I thought to myself: *They never were: they were also for readers*. But now in the libraries they are introducing pop music in the background – in the case I was reading about *The Sugabees*. This is the death of the civilised notion that there is anything above or beyond trivial entertainments. I do not say there should be no pop music: only that it belongs neither in a quiz about real music nor in libraries, places where people were accustomed to read and – God help us! – to *think*.

I suppose I am talking about Christianity and culture and so I ought to clear the ground of certain fundamental misconceptions. First, culture is not some sort of add on – something that you do in your spare time when you have finished doing all the things that are really important to you. Your culture is what defines you. Show me what you value and I'll tell you what you're worth.

Secondly, our culture is not a thing distinct and separate from Christianity. As Eliot said, *Culture is the incarnation of your religion*. And western culture was created by the classical civilisations and by Christianity. The Gothic and the Romanesque styles in architecture did not arise because some particular builder rather liked the idea of them – as you might, if you were a musical numbskull, - rather like *The Bees Gees*. The great architectural styles of the medieval cathedrals were created because they incarnated and represented the spiritual and psychological truths of the Christian faith.

In music 16<sup>th</sup> century polyphony accompanied and sensualised the great texts of the Mass and the other parts of the liturgy. The various musical voices in the sacred polyphony of masters such as Tallis, Palestrina and Byrd echo the voices of the Trinity, the intertwining in everlasting - or rather timeless - love of the Persons Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The great Passions of Bach

– *St Matthew* and *St John* – are second only to the gospels in their immediate presentation to our sense and understanding the suffering of Christ. When you hear those great works, you are taken into the centre of the gospel, into the heart of Christ.

Our great dramas and poems began in ancient Hebrew and Greek when the pressure of profoundly unsettling experience forced the public utterance of a few words in a definite rhythm. In the exodus of the Hebrew slaves: *Sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and the rider hath he thrown into the sea.* Or how about this from *The Odyssey*: *And then went down to the ship, set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea...*

Here in the barely articulated groans of the very depth of feeling lie the origins of such lines as *Be not afraid. The isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.* Or, *What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba that he should weep for her?* And nearer our own day: *What is that noise? The wind under the door. What is that noise now? What is the wind doing? Nothing, again nothing.*

Our culture is not, I repeat, an add on. Above all it is not something to be left to the culture vultures, the avid collectors of obscure catalogues and the arty-farty, the rubbernecking church crawlers and the blundering tourists. Our culture is not a hobby. It is not a diversion. It is the means by stone and glass, by rhythm and music, by which we interpret ourselves to one another and by which we try to stand in all our perplexity and impotence before that terrifying apprehension which some have called *God*

By the side of this the suggestion that art is anything anyone wants to say it is or – as a former Minister of Culture said - that Bob Dylan is as good as Beethoven; or, as the producer of *Counterpoint* thinks, Anton Bruckner and *The Bee Gees* can be mentioned in the same breath, is the depth of ignorance and a blasphemous parody. Let me put it like this: if Plato or Aristotle, or the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* or Maiomedes, Dante, Shakespeare, Lassus, Bach, Rembrandt, Pascal, Dostoevsky, Eliot – if these or others like them are not people to whom you turn for *pleasure – for pleasure* – as you toss aside the colour supplements, then life and civilisation are not what you are interested in.

In talking about about how culture is the embodiment of our faith: I am, of course, talking about tradition. *Tradition* is a swear word to uncultured modern ears. They want you to believe that tradition is something past, dead and buried, insufferably boring. This is because most moderns are merely admen for their own inferior creations and they don't want anything to get in the way of a quick sale. But tradition is living. Tradition is what is handed on. Handed on precisely because it is alive and – this is the important bit – always capable of creative adaptation and development. I mean, consider that all the greatest innovators in modern music and literature were profoundly traditional.

Eliot, Yeats, Pound, Hulme, Lewis were steeped in the classics – and it shows in their work. Schoenberg said, *The first composer to compose with twelve tones was Bach.*

Let me end by trying to give an example of living culture and living tradition by thinking of the language we use in our Scripture and our prayers. The producers of new versions of the bible and the *Prayer Book* are tin-eared mediocrities. *The Book of Common Prayer* has them bang to rights when it describes them as *such men as are given to change, and have always discovered a greater regard to their own private fancies and interests than to that duty they owe to the public.* To imagine that you can change the words and keep the meaning is the profoundest misunderstanding. You cannot bring the classics to the people; you can only try to bring the people to the classics.

Over a long time in the church's ministry, I have noticed something deep and moving which is always a great encouragement, and it is this. People in the pews respond most wholeheartedly not to anything I might merely say off my own bat but to words I quote. *Woman, why weapest thou? Whom seekest thou. She saith, Because they have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him.* This is when people pay attention. This is when heads look up. But they wouldn't look up if you debauched that miraculous text and made it: *Why are you crying? Whom are you looking for?*

The secret depth of meaning is repetition until we know in our hearts. And the reason that oft-repeated verses acquire a supercharged significance is because every time we hear the familiar words they become associated in the deep archives of our memory with all the times we heard them in the past. By repetition we are adding layers of meaning like the strata supporting the house built on rock. *Knowledge is recollection.* The words become hallowed by time and use. And so we pray that we may become hallowed with them.