

First week back at school and we were always asked to write about what we did in the holidays. We went up to Yorkshire where I was still haunted by that dreadful news story about the woman in a Leeds cinema who politely asked a group of youths to stop being so noisy and disruptive. So they pursued her to a supermarket and threw bleach in her face. And now even this ugly event has been surpassed for sheer horror by the account of the two young boys who tortured two other boys to within an inch of their lives. I first heard about the bleach episode on *Radio Four's PM Programme*. After relating this awful tale, the presenter interviewed a journalist who had spent the last two years making a point of gently reprimanding antisocial behaviour wherever he came across it. Phew – was he brave or mad or what!

This journalist was asked to describe the reaction he got from those he confronted. His reply was shocking: “Almost invariably, those perpetrating antisocial behaviour were outraged to have their loutishness pointed out to them – as if by drawing attention to their bad behaviour I had been offending their right to be obnoxious.”

I'm afraid that this is what passes for much of our public life today: too many inconsiderate, unruly yobs causing nuisance and feeling they have a perfect right to do so. They are in fact living out their deranged private lives in public. It's not that they have no concern for other people: they seem totally unaware that other people actually exist.

We had some recent personal experience of this. Up in Yorkshire we were enjoying a delightful week's holiday, staying for part of the time at a guest house in York. In the middle of the night we were disturbed by the young couple in the next room. They came in drunk and, after a mawkish, sentimental interlude peering at photos taken during the evening's proceedings on their portable phones, started the mother and father of all rows. The language alone was enough to set fire to the wallpaper. I don't know which was worse, the row itself or the noise they made making up afterwards. Next morning they came into the dining room and the – shall we say, “lady” – ordered the full English breakfast and, in between bouts of combing her hair at the table, left most of this splendid food untouched.

This, though less severe, was similar to the antics of those boys who threw bleach. Both actions were examples of the generalised infantilisation which infests so much of our public life these days. Those boys and that couple were perfect specimens of the childish self-indulgence and narcissism which is widespread. Like infants in a tantrum, they want what they want and they want it *now*. And God help anyone who happens to be in the way. The hallmark of civilisation is the people's capacity to defer satisfaction. But so many seem incapable of this. There is this babyish craving, this demand, for sensation after sensation.

Is this something new, something unique to our generation, or have we been here before? By coincidence on holiday, I was reading R.G. Collingwood – where he makes this remark:

“From Plato onwards, Greco-Roman society was living its life as a rearguard action against emotional bankruptcy. The critical moment was reached when Rome created an urban proletariat whose only function was to eat free bread and watch free shows. This meant the segregation of an entire class which had no work to do whatever; no positive function in society, whether economic or military or administrative or intellectual or religious; only the business of being supported and amused. When that had been done, it was only a question of time until Plato’s nightmare of a consumer society came true: the drones set up their own king, and the story of the hive came to an end.”

Collingwood speaks of “...the unprecedented growth of the amusement trade, to meet what has become an insatiable craving...the almost universal confession that boredom or lack of interest in life is felt as a constant state of mind.”

Well, civilisation did not end with the fall of the Roman Empire – so what happened to restore it?

“A new consciousness grew up for which practical life was so interesting that organised amusement was no longer needed. The old consciousness fell to pieces before the onslaught of this new consciousness, and theatres and amphitheatres were deserted by a world that had become Christian.”

This did not happen overnight. It began with a very small number of people who took themselves apart from the corrupt way of life: they found little communities, some went into the desert and there was the beginning of that great productive revolution which we know as monasticism. There was work and prayer and fellowship. Besides these things, the tawdry satisfactions of bread and circuses could not compete. Gradually, a new civilisation was born: the great cathedrals, plainchant, the European parish system, the revival of agriculture hand in hand with the renewal of learning in the first universities – which, let us remember, were Christian foundations where theology was Queen of the Sciences. The world put away childish things.

But back to the holidays. From Yorkshire I went to Brighton to where I had been invited to preach for the Patronal Festival at St Bartholomew’s. A poor parish in which, in the middle of the 19th century, someone had the gumption to build a glorious church. So began a vigorous community, a loyal fellowship in which people who were socially-deprived were able through their Christian togetherness to raise themselves above their predicament and transform their lives. That community is pretty much the same today as it was a century and a half ago. Served by faithful, devout and believing priests, the people, the parish, thrives. The church is looked

after. The people are proud of what they are doing. The buffet in the schoolroom – produced by the ladies of the parish – was not just wholesome, but sumptuous and heartfelt. The voluntary choir and orchestra gave us Haydn's *Paukenmesse*.

These are working people – not the underclass of bored drones and infantilised pseudo-sophisticates, nihilistic addicts of texting and tweeting and morbid reality TV. The point is, they are a Christian people and their thriving community is defined and produced by their Christianity: high church, dogmatic, ritualistic, musical.

And now this morning I realise I don't have to go to Brighton to see these things. We are the same sort of community here in St Michael's. We are the successors of the pioneering Christians at the end of the Roman Empire. We are not vast, not numerous, but we are a goodly group. We have life, as Eliot said, in community – only because we exist as a community in the praise of God.

Look at the chaos of modern life but do not despair. Great restorations are made of small beginnings. Eliot again:

“For this immediate future, perhaps for a long way ahead, the continuity of culture may have to be maintained by a very small number of people indeed – and these not necessarily equipped with worldly advantages.”

Those youths who chucked bleach into the woman's face. The bourgeois louts shouting into their portable phones in restaurants and train carriages. The binge-drinking, celeb culture maniacs. These debased human forms living out their depraved private lives in public to the detriment of all – these are not the future. The future is here in our church, in our affectionate fellowship – what the New Testament calls *αγαπη* or *charity*. The future is all in our love for one another, made possible by the love of God