

## Sermon for The Worshipful Company of Fuellers, Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2009...

I was reading recently the story about Pharaoh's dream in which seven thin cows devoured seven fat cows, but still they looked no fatter. It seemed to quite a few of us like a comment on our present economic crisis. Mr Brown says he didn't see it coming, but a member of our congregation at St Michael's, Bill Bonner, predicted the slump years ago in his book *Empire of Debt*. But the whole mess was detected back in 1971 by C.H. Sisson who, writing about Ezra pound, spoke of:

*"...the monstrous aberration of a world in which reality is distorted down to a detail never so comprehensively implicated before by the pull of a fictitious money."*

We needn't get caught up in the old row about usury. The church since the Middle Ages has recognised the need for reasonable rates of interest. Only excessive borrowing and lending leading to mountains of debt is condemned.

But our current crisis involves a lot more than money. It is a cultural and spiritual crisis. Sisson's terrifying phrase *reality is distorted* is precisely the mess we now inhabit. Western societies have for a long time been dealing in unreality. We have forgotten the commandment *Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image*. In fact most people would look at you as if you were barmy if you referred to that piece of primitive nonsense. Except it is not primitive and it is not nonsense. Our age worships image to a degree to which the primitive idolaters never aspired.

Our society has turned away from real life and preferred voyeurism. Seventy-per-cent of the Internet is pornography. Some years ago, the computer industry estimated how much silicon they would need for the worldwide production of microchips. They found their estimate did not even cover the amount needed for video games. Millions spend the greater part of the day solipsistically wasting their lives online. Are we surprised therefore when this week we saw the shocking figures, which revealed that the majority of British people cannot read and write and count adequately? Technology has advanced so that now there are online programmes which allow you to create an artificial reproduction of yourself – called an *avatar* – which can enjoy extraordinary adventures in cyberspace.

For three thousand years philosophers have wrestled with the problem of appearance versus reality. Modern culture has resolved this ancient difficulty by the simple expedient of deleting one of the terms. Now all is appearance. And to be is to be seen when reality is a screen.

For a generation TV producers have been returning our lives to us caricatured and uncriticised in the soap operas – the opium of the masses. But recently they have gone much further. I remember in the 1960s there was a TV play which caused huge controversy. It was called *The*

*Year of the Sex Olympics.* In this play people watched other people's real lives as a form of entertainment. It seemed very far-fetched and of course obscene. Now it has come true in such shows as *Big Brother* and the hideously unreal culture of celebs.

We are living attenuated lives – lives at a distance. Of course a portable phone might be useful if you were thinking of going up a mountain alone. Or if you were a Euro MP and you could record a message saying, *I'm on the gravy train*. But this incessant mindless jabber and obsessive texting is a universal psychosis. People fidgeting over their keyboards as if picking at a scab. A couple walking down Cornhill side by side, speaking into their portable phones – probably to each other.

*Unreal City.* Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, a crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many.

We have rejected the real, incarnational faith of Christianity and adopted colossal unrealities such as universal human rights and the preposterous pagan myth of Global Warming. We aspire to save the planet. We cannot even save our own souls.

The church used to provide the antidote to this stony rubbish, this zombie-like dreaming, this lack of attention, this *tumid apathy with no concentration*. But over the last generation the church has capitulated and adopted the very procedures of its enemies. First by abandoning its sacred English texts *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer* and substituting for them prayers that sound as if they were written by the illiterate partnership of the advertising industry and Noddy.

All so similar to the way things were in St Augustine's Day. So, is there anything we can learn from those days to help us clear up the mess we're in? Let me try to cheer us up. The catastrophic end of the Roman Empire saw the beginning of monasticism. Christian groups withdrew from society and deliberately set themselves apart in order to preserve in their communities whatever was left of the good life and to wait for more auspicious times: what we might call *the recovery*.

It is of course impossible for us in the global village to withdraw to anywhere. There is no escaping universal technology and communications. Nor should we want to. But we can learn from monasticism. Monasticism was an institution. And we have institutions so we don't die of politics. Politics is a necessary evil. We cannot trust politicians of any party precisely because they are in it for the short term – the next election, even the next opinion poll. This skews and corrupts public life because it disposes of the long-term interest which is our real need.

Gradually, monasticism became a great power throughout Europe. And when the Dark Ages receded and the brilliant civilisation of the Middle Ages arose, other institutions were developed as well. These included the wonderful medieval trades guilds and societies and the Livery

Companies. These were deeply rooted in the Christian faith. They had – and still have – their Patron Saints. They formed the mysteries of their trades. And the origin of that word μυστηριον - mystery – is a Sacrament.

But the province of our Company is not limited to technical matters. This Company is dedicated to God, the origin of all intelligence. And under the commandment of God, the ancient Livery Companies established the principle of charity and, out of charity, service. In a barbarous world, the Livery Companies developed chivalry and courtly love, and etiquette. They created and celebrated hospitality, friendship and conviviality.

Without these things, politics is dead and society is barbaric. So in our contemporary crisis, the Livery Companies are not irrelevant or out of date. You are needed now more than at any time in a thousand years. It is you – and your fellow Liveries – who are the custodians of the best in our society. Up then and assert yourselves. Let us become what we are meant to be: lights in the encircling gloom.