

## Sermon Fuellers' Sunday 2010...

I don't know why it should be, but there seem to be more tall stories about fuel and power than about anything else. There's a tale from the old Soviet Union about a housewife who rang up the Commissar for the People's Gas and asked if someone could be sent round to repair a fault. The Commissar said, "Certainly, I can give you a date – 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2012." The woman thanked him and said, "Will that be morning or afternoon?" Astonished that she should want this information so far in advance, the Commissar said, "Why do you ask?"

"Well," she said "the electricity man is coming that day in the morning and I wanted to avoid a clash!"

The thing about fuel and power – about you good Fuellers in church today, like me trying to run the parish – is that we're all involved in something practical and hands-on. In your case certainly – and I like to hope in mine – useful. But over the years some damn silly things have been said about parsons and about the fuel and power industries – by people who ought to have known better. For example in 1848, Professor Erasmus Wilson of the University of Oxford declared solemnly, "When the Paris Exhibition closes, electric light will close with it and no more will be heard of it."

And when the British Parliamentary Committee met to give its judgement on Edison's electric light, they said, "Electricity is good enough for our transatlantic friends – but unworthy of the attention of practical or scientific men."

Gas comes off no better. Even a genius such as Sir Walter Scott was rash enough to say, "There is a young madman proposing to light the streets of London with – what do you suppose? – with smoke!" The great novelist had completely misunderstood the process of extracting gas from coal.

When nuclear power was in its infancy, even rasher promises were made about the heaven on earth that this would produce. Alex Lewyt, President of the Lewyt Corporation which manufactured household cleaning gadgets, prophesied in 1955: "Nuclear powered vacuum-cleaners will be a reality within ten years." And Dr Edward Teller, "Father of the hydrogen bomb," once warned us, "You get more radiation leaning up against your wife than from a nuclear reactor!"

Electric Power stations, gas stations, coal-mines and oil wells are practical institutions which we could not do without. It follows that we must care for these institutions so that they can care for us. I remember back in the early 1980s when the Cold War had hotted up a bit and there was a perceived nuclear threat. It was, some of you may recall, the time of all those apocalyptic

civil defence films on TV – “Jump into a cardboard box” - and the sensational cartoon strip *Where the Wind Blows*, put out to frighten the children.

I was a country parson in Yorkshire at the time when I suddenly inherited, as it were, a retired very senior British army General who came to live in the big house next door to the vicarage. There were builders in for weeks and then, one Sunday lunchtime at one of his very convivial drinks parties, the General announced that he was building a nuclear bunker under his basement. We talked about the government’s civil defence precautions and the General said, “All tosh, old boy. As soon as there’s a nuclear emergency, all the lights will go out.”

So we see just how vital our fuel and power institutions are. On this Fuellers’ Sunday, in which the Collect for the Day prays that God will stir us up - we should remember that there are other sorts of institutions which we must care for just as diligently. I mean the schools and universities, the sovereignty of Parliament, the rule of law, the church and the monarchy.

All these things are crucial to our well-being. It matters that there are standards in schools so that our children can be equipped for life. It is not enough that primary schools should merely be places where the young are encouraged to cut up little squares of yellow paper and stick them on rather larger squares of blue paper. They need to learn to write and to count and they need to know something of the history of the nation in which they live. This means that it is our duty to teach them and to fail in this is a colossal neglect.

In the same way, universities must be places of scholarship and excellence. There is a genuine place for golf-studies and the advanced hairdressing diploma, but it is not the university. As to the rule of law, this is crucial for a civilised society. But the law must be rooted in an actual people and their history and way of life. It cannot be constructed artificially out of abstract principles such as definitions of universal human rights.

When it comes to the church as an institution, we at St Michael’s are locked in a life and death struggle with the forces of banality who would have us change our traditional wedding service so that the priest prays over the happy couple, “Let them be tender with each other’s dreams!” We do the loveliest weddings in the City here by the way and would be delighted to welcome members of the Fuellers’ Company and their sons and daughters. We still use the real Bible and the real Prayer Book here. Beware of imitations!

At the pinnacle of all our institutions is the monarchy of course. I’ve been reading a book of some of the Queen’s sayings which someone gave me for the Jubilee last year. It reveals Her Majesty as a very sharp and witty lady, not afraid to speak her mind. Once, the Queen’s coach splashed mud over a pedestrian in Sandringham. The pedestrian, a woman, shouted something angrily and the Queen answered her, “I quite agree”. The Duke of Edinburgh turned to the Queen and asked, “What did she say, dear?” The Queen replied, “Bastards!”

And now as the nation prepares to celebrate another royal wedding, we should be thankful again for this royal throne of kings, this precious stone set in a silver sea; this earth, this realm, this England....And ever ready to defend it from marauders without and the more sinister and more loathsome enemies within.