

Sermon Judgement 2010

The second of *The Four Last Things* is *judgement*. Usually this Sunday gives the preacher an opportunity to speak about God's judgement, the final judgement we shall all face. But there is another aspect of judgement which is of very practical importance for us all in the here and now. In the Hebrew a word for judgement is *mishpat* which means the ordering of human society according to the law of God. Interestingly, *mishpat* is also used to describe the right way to make or create: it was, for instance, used to refer to how the Temple in Jerusalem should be constructed. I shall explore this connection between judgement and creativity. The Greek word for judgement is *krisis* from which we derive *crisis* and *criticism*.

So it is God's will that we order our lives and all that we make and do according to his *mishpat* and *krisis*. That is we must learn to live fruitful, creative lives and to employ our God-given faculties critically in everything we do and make. Individuals and societies, people and nations, which try to live orderly lives and to apply constantly critical appraisal prosper. The people and nations which do not live and act like this, become decadent and finally collapse. The biblical way of describing this is to say that they come under God's judgement. Unfortunately, our society and culture – because we live without judgement – is far gone into decadence and at the point of collapse.

Let us take a close look. Music means a lot to us at St Michael's, so perhaps I can start there. In spite of our better instincts, my wife and I persist in watching *University Challenge*. There comes a point every week in that programme when Paxo says, *You are about to hear a piece of music*. This is usually a breach of the Trades Description Act. For what we get is rather a piece of noise. It is the same sort of noise which befouls and corrupts every aspect of public life. It's in the pub and the restaurant. You hear it going *swish swish* in other passengers' earphones on the train. Despite the fact that there are scores of radio stations devoted to this audible filth, you cannot pass half an hour listening to *Radio Four* without suffering a blast of pop music. If you try to watch Attenborough's nature programmes, you will find that there is the intrusion of rock and pop even on the Masai Mara and, though you take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost depths of the Attenborough sea, you will hear the same noise there as well.

This disgrace is made more disgraceful because the whole of the mass media insists on calling this noise *music*, when real music is precisely the antidote to this stuff. A vicious shift has occurred. We used to have *music* and then something else called *pop music*. Now we have *music* and something marginal referred to as *classical music*. So in music we discover the first example of where our society has lost its *mishpat* and *krisis*. The result is that we inhabit a kingdom of noise. No wonder one of the words for hell is *pandemonium*.

Well, there's a lot to do, so I must move on and discuss what is generally called *art*. Art used to involve certain techniques and skills by which the artist, with very great labour, attempted to represent or portray some aspect of reality. I am not talking only about representative realism. What I have to say applies just as well to the artistic representation of subjective states, moods, feelings and even the abstract dimensions which form the blueprint of the world. Judgement is not against modernity. There are wonderful modernists: Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Matisse, Gaudier Brezca, Gaudi, James Macmillan. Judgement is not against modernity. Judgement is against trash, hoax and fraud. For now *art* has come to mean whatever anyone wants it to mean.

Damien Hirst goes into a shop and buys a small doll. He then finds a sculptor and pays him to make an exact copy of this doll, but six or seven feet tall. The sculptor makes it. Hirst then sells it for £10million to Charles Saatchi who installs it as a work of art in his gallery.

This is not art: it is the profiteering gimmickry of the advertising industry. Saatchi knows there's a mug born every minute and that plenty of people will turn out to gawp at Hirst's atrocity and wonder what the hell it means. I'll tell you what it means: it means a gullible public is being conned. A public with no *mishpat*, no *krisis*. No judgement. This sort of rubbish has polluted the world of art just as noise has invaded the province of music. If you have the stomach, go and take a look around Tate Modern. Here you will find more installations: ironically, a copy of an artist's workshop instead of a real workshop with a real artist in it. The best thing provided by Tate Modern is the view of St Paul's from the upstairs window. This is not an art gallery. It is the vandalising of what was once a perfectly decent power station. Or you can have a light bulb flickering on and off, and it's called a work of art. Or an unmade bed. Or an animal – why not a bishop? – in formaldehyde. This is not art: it is a society in thrall to decadence, because it has lost its judgement.

I was once given a tour of the *Lloyds* building - that structure with its innards on the outside. The main office including the very low ceiling was almost entirely in black – and still my guide wondered why there was such a high rate of suicides among the workers there. There was a movement in 20th century architecture which sought first to shock and then to draw attention to the architects themselves – to turn them into the equivalent of rock stars and celebs. One thinks of Le Corbusier and his *machines for living in*. But *avant garde* architects usually prefer for themselves something high renaissance in the South of France. Corbusier wanted to pull down Paris in the interests, as he put it, *of hygiene*.

When it comes to our public buildings, one has nightmares featuring the Bauhaus or the Leninist ideas of the Russian Constructivists. I do not actually have to travel so far when I have the Barbican on my doorstep. I remember saying to Alex Boot that it resembles the Lubyanka prison. And Alex reprimanded me, saying, *The Lubyanka is a masterpiece compared with the*

Barbican. One recoils before the works and worse, the architectural philosophy, of Mies and Fry, Loos and Giedion. But we can be thankful for small mercies. The plan of Peter Palumbo to destroy the beautiful Victorian buildings at the bottom of Poultry was rejected. This was the scheme to abolish the medieval street plan and to construct a hideous square of windswept concrete. Though, unfortunately, *Number 1* went ahead. And so we have a little outbreak of Toytown right next door to Mansion House

Compare the superstar pretensions of some modern architects with the anonymity of the men who built the cathedrals – knowing usually that they would not even live to see their work finished. The Greeks knew that the purpose of architecture is the public good. Buildings and town squares were designed with the vocation of the public realm in mind. In an age when politics had meaning, public space was sacred space. And public buildings became the reification of the people's soul. Streets and squares were supposed to reveal the character and soul of the people. What do our public spaces say about our character, our soul? The word *soulless* actually has tangible meaning in some of these places. Goethe said, *Architecture is frozen music*. And when you look at the great European buildings of his day, you see an incarnation of the baroque and classical proportions of Bach and Mozart. What music do we see frozen in the buildings of our public realm? Too much of it is frozen Heavy Metal and Punk.

And now they have spent three years ripping up Cheapside and Watling Street to erect dismal frock shops and the superfluity of naff cafes. The cathedrals and parish churches, the old town halls and market buildings were built to the glory of God, and then to be pleasing and useful for the conduct of daily life. This life was broadly humanistic. People were regarded as living souls, sentient beings with the capacity to pursue a moral vocation. But so many of our new so called *developments* are monuments to crass consumerism, designed for a population that has been thoroughly infantilised.

Because we are not disembodied minds, because we are bodies, parts and passions, what we compose, make and construct reveals our innermost character and demonstrates our aims and intentions. Art, music, architecture and literature can both reveal and direct our moral and social existence under God and as a community. Alternatively art, music, architecture and literature can caricature, parody, sneer at and debase the human form divine. What we make tells us who we are. It is all a matter of choice – for what you choose is what you'll end up with. For the good of our souls and our life together we must pray for *mishpat* and *krisis*. For judgement.

The agent and inspiration of human creativity is the Holy Ghost. Therefore, we should end with the Collect that we say on Whitsunday, the Festival of the Holy Ghost:

O God, who as at this time didst teach the hearts of thy faithful people, by sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.