

Sermon: New Year 2011

People today celebrate the New Year more vigorously than they used to. When I was a boy, we never stayed up until midnight on New Year's Eve. There wasn't much to stay up for in Leeds in the 1950s. Come to think of it, there wasn't much to go to bed for either. Certainly in my lifetime there has been a great increase in the public's general capacity for superstition, with horoscopes appearing even in the so called *serious* newspapers, and online astrology is booming. The turn of the year, I think, gives people an excuse to hope – even to hope against hope – that the New Year will be a lucky one, a good one, or at least better than the last.

I should like to think we might use the turn of the year to think about the passage of time and of how this connects to our sense of history. Let's begin with recent history. Fifty years ago we were still a Christian country. When the Butler Education Act of 1944 prescribed religious education in schools and made a daily assembly obligatory, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the religion referred to was Christianity. Now, whether we like it or not, that culture is dead and we are a pluralistic, multicultural society.

There are, for instance, twice as many Muslims in Britain than Methodists. And, apart from the many world religions practised in our society, there is also a very strong current of aggressive secularism. This is more complex than it looks and there is a selective viciousness about secularism. For while it's all right openly to criticise Christianity, a similar hostility directed against other faiths is prohibited by the ideology of political correctness – and of course by sheer cowardice in the face of the Islamist threat.

As a priest in the church militant, I don't mind persecution. The great church father Tertullian famously said, *The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church*. Let the secularist bigots who have declared their aim to remove Christianity from public life rant and rail and fulminate as much as they like. This only makes me more determined and more vigorous in opposing them. But what I find intolerable is the craven attitude of the bishops, the synod and most of the rest of the church hierarchy. They have abandoned our thousand year old history of English Christianity and largely accepted the secular settlement – and all the innovations in social policy that go with it. If the Church of England was once the Tory party at prayer, it is now, if not quite the socialist party at the barricades, then at least the soggy coalition at the sherry party.

But the church has not only accommodated its ethical teaching and social policies to the secular settlement, it has ditched the founding and central doctrines of the faith. I heard a canon theologian say on *Thought for the Day* in Advent that he couldn't bring himself to believe in the Last Judgement. In better days that would have led to his announcing his resignation. But the church has capitulated to the dogmas of modernity. So, generally speaking – there are some

admirable exceptions – members of today's hierarchy and the priesthood in general do not believe the core doctrines of the Incarnation, Original Sin, the Atonement and the Resurrection.

Or rather they have perverted and diluted these doctrines to form a series of extended metaphors for their preferred social and ethical programme. So for them the Incarnation is no longer regarded as the coming into flesh of the Son of God, but instead it is declared to be Christ's identification with the poor, the homeless and the refugee. All this in defiance of the facts: of the fact that Joseph was not poor, he was a respectable craftsman of the middle class; the fact that Joseph and Mary were not homeless but owned a house in Nazareth; the fact that they were not refugees but, like everyone else at the time, going to their place of historic origin for the census ordered by Caesar Augustus.

The leaders of our church no longer believe in Original Sin. It's much too demeaning for them to consider themselves sinners. They believe in that modern secular dogma of *progress* instead. Again in defiance of the facts. The fact that we all know in our hearts that we constantly fall short. We do the things we ought not to and we leave undone the things we should do. But the hierarchy believe in progress in defiance of all the historical catastrophes of modern times: the world wars and the genocides of the last hundred years which have seen more people slaughtered than in the whole of previous history. And still our modern churchmen commit themselves to the lying dogma of progress.

Since they don't believe in Original Sin, they can't make any sense of Christ's atoning death to bring us salvation. So instead they waffle about *saving the planet* and *accepting diversity*. Effectually, the Church of England has resigned.

And of course a key component of secular modernity is deterministic materialism. So most of the senior clergy don't believe in Christ's resurrection. I can't understand why they persist in this clapped out dogma of materialism when modern physics has been telling them for a century that, whatever the world is made of, it's much less like material stuff and much more like mind stuff. And when quantum mechanics has demonstrated that, far from determinism being the case, the very concept of physical causation is redundant. Have they never read Heisenberg? Have they never heard of Godel who proved that all mathematical processes – including those of physics – are bound to be incomplete?

My hope for the New Year is that our people will come to understand that the prevailing secular materialism is not intellectually defensible but that traditional Christianity is.

As for the caved in hierarchy, what is there left to say of them? Those who were appointed to be leaders of the church, who promised at their ordination to defend and extend it, have brought it close to destruction. Their most disgusting act of religious and literary vandalism was the hierarchy's rejection of *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer* by which they

deprived the people of England of their sacred texts. Suddenly the Archbishop of Canterbury urges us all to read the *King James Bible* – this from a man who has held positions of high power and influence in the church for decades: a church which, over the same period, has viciously suppressed both *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer*. It is a bit late in the day for the Archbishop to find his voice. Cromwell's statement to the Rump Parliament is more than they deserve:

You have sat too long for any good you have been doing lately ... Depart, I say; and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!

Some reports say that Cromwell added the condemnation that this corrupt Parliament had no more religion than his horse. At this distance in time it is difficult to tell whether these last, scathing words were appropriate in the case of the Rump Parliament, but they are certainly an apt condemnation of those who have presided over the decline of the Church of England in recent decades. At best our leaders have been incompetent. Often they have been vicious. They have always been preferential to their own sort, cunning, prejudiced, pursuing power at the cost of charity. They have nearly destroyed our Christian inheritance and so they no longer deserve our respect or our obedience. The shepherds have not defended the sheep against the wolves, but fed them to the wolves

In spite of all the desecrations which the church has imposed upon itself these last forty years, the traditional faith has not been expunged entirely. There are pockets of resistance and areas of sanity here and there. Those who still hold fast to the faith must do all in their power to encourage the traditional remnant, maintain their courage and, above all, pray constantly for a return of the *intelligibility* mentioned by Charles Sisson who said:

What then is the position of the theological rump in our now lay, secularised clerisy? There are three possibilities. They can stay and fight their corner, struggling for an intelligibility which might come again, and will come, if it is the truth they are concerned with. They can sit on pillars in some recess of the national structure, waiting for better times. Or they can let their taste for having an ecclesiastical club carry them into one or other of those international gangs of opinion – that which has its headquarters in Rome or that which has a shadowy international meeting-place in Canterbury. In any case it will be a political choice that is being made. For my part, I shall prefer those who stay and fight their corner, content to be merely the Church in a place.

That is my position too. I will stay and fight my corner. I invite you to be with me the church in *this* place – the church and parish of St Michael, Cornhill

