

The recent election campaign was disappointing. Each party simply blamed the others for all the nation's ills. The language was homogenised banality, interchangeable. It didn't much matter who was speaking. Most of the speeches, the propaganda, was largely anodyne and meaningless. All the leaders said they wanted *change*. But unless you spell out change from what to what, the word is merely vacuous. More and more election campaigns seem to be just parts of the advertising industry. In fact everything that is done and said in public life seems nowadays to be modelled on the form of an advertisement. Every political speech, every nannying injunction from the bossy, bureaucratic state, sounds like a sales pitch.

I recall the composer Peter Maxwell Davies wrote an article in which he said he was writing an opera about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. It was going very well, but just at the climactic moment when the Lord appeared in the sky, descending with the clouds of heaven, Maxwell Davies was overcome by a sense of the ridiculous. He could no longer believe in his opera and he said aloud, *Oh it's no good: you're just an advert!*

Our politicians do not show much understanding of human nature. They blame everyone else but themselves. They promise the earth. And then they promise heaven on earth. They seem to imagine that with them all things are possible. I should have liked to hear a speech something like this:

*Do not vote for the other parties. They made mistakes last time. Mind you, we made mistakes too. We promise to try to do better but don't bank on it. Because we are human beings and imperfect. The things we try to do, we often fail at. And our motives are not pure either. Mixed with our idealism is a great deal of cynical self-interest. But we will try to do better. Just don't expect too much, that's all.*

I should have liked to hear less vacuous talk about *change* and more about *repentance*. Now *repentance* does not mean grovelling and beating yourself up. *Repentance* comes from a word found in the Gospels, μετανοια which means literally *change your mind* or better still *think again!* St Paul says, *be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.* (Romans 12:2). Time and again the New Testament writers ask us to renew our minds – to think the unthinkable, which is to entertain the notion that we might be mistaken. All of us not just the politicians. The message of today, Whitsunday, is *Repent*. Take a new look at yourself. Admit your faults. Confess to your mixed motives. Acknowledge that you are not the master of your fate and seek God's grace to amend your life. μετανοια. *Think again!*

Yes, yes, all this is true. But it is not the whole truth. The whole truth is more subtle. We know we should not be like the politicians: pretending we can do anything we say we can do and blaming everyone else when things go wrong. But there is an equal and opposite trap into

which we might fall, and this is constantly to despise ourselves, to be forever discontented with ourselves, to be always enumerating our faults. Conceit and self-delusion is bad. But self-loathing is just as bad. It is also snobbery, a form of the sin of pride, to say *I'm not just a common or garden sinner: I'm the chief of sinners! I'm the worst of the lot!*

You must remember you are a sinner, you are imperfect with mixed motives, flawed judgement and a weak will, prone to bad habits, making the same mistakes over and over again. But you are also *a member of Christ, a child of God and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven*. You are not totally depraved. You might be rotten, but you are not completely rotten. We are half-rotten, perhaps; but we are also half golden. Remember, as St Irenaeus said, you are made in the Image of God. You are certainly handicapped by Original Sin but the Image of God is never obliterated in you. You are susceptible, thank God, to Divine Grace. So, yes, confront your sins but don't wallow in them. Don't keep beating yourself up all the time. For to do that is to despise and reject the Image of God which he placed indelibly in you.

As I said, all this is far from simple. It is subtle. And so for the rest of this sermon I am going to turn for help to a subtler mind than mine. I want to tell you something of what the great Samuel Taylor Coleridge had to say on the matter.

Coleridge urges us to reflection, to take an honest look at ourselves:

*Dwell at home. It is surprising that the greater part of mankind cannot be prevailed upon at least to VISIT themselves sometimes. An hour of solitude passed in sincere and earnest prayer, or the conflict with and conquest over a single passion or a subtle bosom sin, will teach more of thought, will more effectively awaken the faculty and form the habit of reflection than a year's study in the schools without them.*

Reasonable reflection, looking into our own hearts, makes us understand that Christian truth is the satisfaction that we intermittently but desperately crave. He says:

*The sense, the inward feeling in the soul of each believer of its exceeding desirableness – the experience that he needs something, joined with the strong foretokening that the redemption and the graces propounded to us in Christ are what he needs – this I hold to be the true foundation of the spiritual edifice.*

And it is reasonable reflection which awakes our conscience and stimulates us into spiritual awareness. We must not expect ourselves to be better than we are. As you are commanded to have mercy on your neighbour, so you should deal mercifully with yourself. Coleridge adds these encouraging words:

*Art thou under the tyranny of sin – a slave to vicious habits – at enmity with God, and a skulking fugitive from thine own conscience? The best and most Christian-like pity thou canst show is to take pity on thine own soul. The best and most acceptable service thou canst render is to do justice and show mercy to thyself.*

So you are to look into yourself, examine your motives. Some of what you see you won't like. But no grovelling. No self-loathing. It's not allowed. In a magnificent passage, Coleridge the great poet and the master theologian tells us where to look for relief:

*Linger not in the justice court, listening to thy indictment. Loiter not in waiting to hear the sentence. No, anticipate the verdict. Appeal to Caesar. Haste to the King for a pardon. Struggle thitherward, though in fetters; and cry aloud and collect the whole remaining strength of thy will in thy outcry, 'Lord, I believe. Help thou mine unbelief!' Disclaim all right of property in thy fetters. Say that they belong to the old man, and that thou dost but carry them to the grave to be buried with their owner! Fix thy thought on what Christ did, what Christ is – as if thou wouldst fill the hollowness of thy soul with Christ. If he emptied himself of glory to become sin for thy salvation, must not thou be emptied of thy sinful self to become righteousness in and through his agony and the effective merits of his Cross?*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as his friend Charles Lamb affectionately recalled him,

*An archangel, a little damaged.*

So are we all.