

Cutlers Sermon 2004...

Manners maketh man. It is by politeness, etiquette and charity that society is saved from falling into a heap of savagery. In those much-despised centuries known as the Middle Ages, there was a word for the whole culture of politeness, etiquette and charity, and that word was “chivalry”. And it was of course in the Middle Ages that the trades guilds and livery movement was born. Nowadays, in the blatant savagery that has replaced civilisation, the Middle Ages are despised as “primitive” and “barbaric”. Whenever the brainless BBC presenters or the flashy numbskulls in the newspapers use the word “medieval”, they do so only in the pejorative sense. There is this entirely fatuous superstition that the world has progressed from those faraway times, and that we do things much more decently nowadays.

This superstition, this piece of debauched reasoning and purblind self-conceit is worth examining. The despised and derogated Middle Ages produced, among others, St Thomas Aquinas. Thomas set out the first coherent and systematic treatise explaining the relationship between God the Creator and his world. This argument has never been refuted or surpassed. If you want an introduction to St Thomas, you can do no better than read the great G.K. Chesterton’s biography of him

The Middle Ages also were the time of Dante and his *Divine Comedy*, the most beautiful and wise long poem ever written. And so far from being barbaric, it was the Christian Middle Ages which invented the doctrine of the just war and so limited the amount of actual bloodshed that took place. Another slander is that the medieval bishops advised Columbus not to go on his voyage across the great sea because – the world being flat – he would fall off the end. Not so. Dante knew that on the ascent and descent of Mount Purgatory, the sun rises and sets on either side – demonstrating that the world is round. And what the medieval bishops actually said to Christopher Columbus was that if he set out for India in a westward direction, he would have to travel not 3000 miles but 14,000 miles. Can we have an end to the lies now, please? They did not think the world was flat. They had been taught after all by the ancient Greek Aristarchus that the world is round.

Let’s come down to this same earth and closer to home. It was the craftsmen of the so-called primitive Middle Ages who built the finest buildings the world has ever seen: the cathedrals of Europe. And this is the point: they had the faith to understand that this labour would take many more years than a single man’s lifetime. They were prepared to give 400 years to the construction of, say, York Minster. Not only the great cathedrals but, in every town and village, beautiful and elegant churches to the glory of God and the salvation of man. It was in those far off times that the ancient guilds and companies, including our own, had their beginning and practised a charitable and chivalrous life. And in the Romance poetry and courtly love of those days, there was far more respect for women – actually ladies – than you’ll ever find in today’s feminism. The only use the sneering, lewd and shifty modern world has for the word “ladies” is to refer to a public lavatory.

You Cutlers, and all the livery, are needed today more than ever. Kindness, gentleness, elegance, charity, manners – all these things are in desperately short supply in the media-infested world of contemporary culture: I should say anti-culture. If a man were to return from the Middle Ages and see us today, he would describe us as “barbaric” – and rightly so.

Western society has not always been rotten. Even as recently as the 19th century, quality and excellence were admired, respected, worshipped. The great cultural heroes of the day were the poets and composers: Goethe, Schiller, Coleridge, Beethoven and

Brahms. Mind actually counted for something and people, read the philosophers Kant and Schopenhauer. Ordinary folk by the hundreds of thousands read the serialisations of Dickens in the small magazines. My own grandfather could recite whole tracts of *A Tale of Two Cities* off by heart. What do the advanced and progressed masses of our day read except lying, lascivious tabloid newspapers and airport novels full of fornication and filth and bad grammar? The gymnastic aspect of European culture in the 19th century was the ballet. Now it is the sheer nastiness of football with its snarling, swearing, grimacing participants and the hordes of demented supporters.

Instead of the Medieval idea of the admirable man, the good man, our so-called improved age has only the celebrity. And what is the definition of a celebrity? Someone you've never heard of. And the celebrity is not respected for his wisdom, his art or his manners, but merely for being loud, brash and blatant. Everything nowadays has to be loud, brash and blatant and full of four letter words and sex as a consumer durable according to which any form of coupling, anybody with anybody, is permitted. That's what celebs are for – they exist so we can watch them fornicate. And there is no longer any difference between fame and notoriety. All that matters is that they get themselves seen, and we get ourselves seen seeing them. Appearance has replaced reality. To be is to be seen when reality is a TV screen. Think of *Big Brother*. And where the Middle Ages had the celebration of *all* life in *The Divine Comedy*, the troubadours and the minstrels, we have only a crazed population addicted to watching its own low life in dreary, life-denying soap-operas such as *EastEnders*

What about the supposed moral progress on which modernity so prides itself? Well, we have seen the willed destruction of the family, the corruption of childhood by a promiscuous and premature advertisement of sexuality. In the Middle Ages, abortion was condemned as most unnatural, a mortal sin. Nowadays in this country alone we rip untimely from the womb 180,000 babies because their existence does not suit our lifestyle requirements. Abortion is in fact used as the most popular form of contraception. The Medieval concept of grace has been supplanted by disgrace. And the medieval ideal of freedom is being replaced by the totalitarian superstate accountable to no one - except the elite apparatchiks and international bureaucrats on their gravy-train. As Alan Bennett says brilliantly in his new play, "The loss of our liberty is the price we pay for our freedom".

The allegedly primitive people of the Middle Ages understood that there is a wonderful order of angels and men, with God the Holy Trinity underpinning the lot. And feudal society reflected this order. They don't believe in God these days as they lurch about in their baseball caps and trainers, chewing with their mouths open in the street substances so disgusting as to put you off eating forever; as they text one another mindlessly on their accursed mobile phones; as they stagger from the nightclub to the disco; as they shop till they drop for the sheer lust of wanting trinkets. I said they don't believe in God. But this is only a wilful neglect and an inherent stupidity. They haven't even the intelligence to devise an atheistic philosophy.

There is no community any longer, only the cult of consumerism which at any moment degenerates into a war of all against all. But as T.S. Eliot warned us: "There is no life not lived in community; and no community not lived in praise of God". This is why you, ladies and gentlemen of this worshipful Company and all the Livery are needed more than ever today. You exist to redeem this fallen world. You exist to be a light in the darkness and a beacon on the hill. You exist to remind this feckless and nihilistic society that there is a more excellent way – a way of kindness, of manners, of the smile and not the habitual snarl of the congenital football fan; a world of elegance and courtesy, of etiquette, charity and - if we dare to aspire to it – love. For God is love. And he who would love God must love his neighbour also. Amen.