

Remember Jesus Christ

THE bells were silent, but in the churches and chapels of Oxford their worship of God was being prepared in sundry different ways, ranging from the highly polished brass of the Salvation Army to the incense and chasubles of the high church through a series of elaborate and faintly ludicrous doctrinal variations. Oxford retains some vestigial reminders of the fact that it was once one of the Christian centres of Europe. Choirboys unselfconsciously march the streets in gowns and mortarboards; ... lay clerks put off their week-day occupations; scholars destined to read the lesson wander about inquiring as to the pronunciation of the more recondite Hebrew proper names; the clergy are pregnant with brief intellectual sermons; dons prepare to pay homage to the deity."¹

Not quite the lush description of *Brideshead Revisited* which defined a generation and from which there seems no escape. But perhaps more suitable to a prosaic post-War age, and the age of austerity and retrenchment to which our hybrid government is marching us with such puritanical, self-flagellating zeal. Nor does the description quite fit Oxford of the present. Are clergy still "pregnant with brief intellectual sermons" or are they simply pregnant? Do dons, or many dons, "pay homage to the Deity"? And if they do, is it to Professor Dawkins? He certainly seems to be omniscient and omni-present. Times change: that is our tragedy. And Oxford changes: that is its tragedy. But here we are, ever hopeful, on the morning of a new academic year with all that it promises of scholarship and learning, of love and loves lost, of hearts won and hearts broken, of exploring new territories and expanding horizons, of the heady mix of work and play pursued with an enviable intensity over the next eight weeks, three terms and academic year. And when you launch yourselves on an expectant world, intellectually equipped for the great adventure of life beyond the academic cloister, weighed down by crippling debt and the prospect of a graduate tax, let us hope that it was all worthwhile. At least for the moment you are poised between the glittering prizes and the long littleness of life.

You have chosen to begin the academic year here. Being here at all is an act of dedication. You have chosen to worship God in word and sacrament in this Chapel. Others have chosen similarly, if not so well: some in their College Chapels, some in conventicles of one sort or another, with those degrees of doctrinal nuance that were sketched in that opening quotation. And, although a minority, they make a statement rejecting and contradicting the professed secular ethos of the University. A University founded by Christian souls has lost that soul. But we assert that through the Incarnation, that doctrine central to an understanding of the Oxford Movement, that God cannot be divorced for learning and from life. We assert with Gerard Manley Hopkins, in prose that is as glinting as his poetry: "All things ... are charged with God and, if we know how to touch them, give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him." A society and a University with no religion, that allows itself to be subsumed beneath that vaguely liberal, humanist, agnostic egalitarian collectivism is no society and no university at all. It is as dehumanising and unregenerate as godless communism. Our response to such an environment ought not to be supine acceptance but a prophetic engagement with

¹ Edmund Crispin, *The Case of the Guilded Fly*. London, Vintage Books [1944] p. 160

those forces with all the intellectual and spiritual weapons at our command: "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love ... Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord ... but take your share of suffering for the gospel, who saved us and called us with a holy calling ... Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard ... in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us."²

We can assert that it is the Christian religion that can explain all aspects of human life as it is lived: from the depths of our moral misery to the intellectual grandeur that we can attain; our capacity for entering relations with God. We were created to know God, created to enjoy God, created by God to be gloriously free human persons. The whole doctrine of the Christian religion is a doctrine of love. It starts with the doctrine of the love of God in the creation of the world, in the salvation of the world, in making himself known in his Beloved Son to humankind. Our love for God extends into love for one another as individuals, in families, in communities striving together in Christ-like imitation for the common good, for the good of all.

As the visit of Pope Benedict illustrated, we have to live out our vocations within an unsympathetic and hostile environment, within the University and without. The state's identification with the values of liberal humanism, of moral relativism, of secular impulses and the aggressive atheism identified by the Pope and witnessed by us in its strident rhetoric, its arguments based on ignorance and willful distortion, to undermine the Christian religion from the public square and from public discourse. Only the true liberal and egalitarian can promote the most illiberal and elitist doctrine with that lack of self-awareness and blindness to its hypocrisy that is truly astonishing. Truth and morality now seem to be what Stephen Fry says they are.

Principles of freedom of speech, the rule of law, equality before the law, a commonality of national interest are not the preserve of the chattering classes. They are entirely congruent with Catholic social principles: the innate dignity of every human person created in the image and likeness of God and of equal worth before Him; the belief in the duty of civil authorities to pursue that which is for the common good, to protect the weak and vulnerable, to ameliorate social deprivation and poverty. But as Pope Benedict pointed out, "if the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are ... determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident."³ We have seen evidence enough in the past few years of the squalid certainties of contemporary morality, of the inadequacy of pragmatic, short-term solutions to complex social and ethical problems that bear on the freedom of individual conscience.

The Pope's challenge is no more than the challenge of the Gospel, the challenge of the Mass. Our vocation is to be a voice in the public square and in the academy articulating truths and insights, revelations and ethical norms that have underpinned law and society for generations. And in this House we have another mission, to bring, in Dr Pusey's words, "to the vivid consciousness of members of the Church of England, Catholic truths taught of old within her." And none of us can escape the irony that in the hour of the apotheosis of the Oxford Movement in raising Blessed John Henry Newman to the altars of the Church, the General Synod, an institution as malign as it is absurd, would legislate it out of the Church of England. Ours should be the candid voice of insistent

² II Timothy 1: 6 – 7, 13 – 14

³ Pope Benedict XVI in a speech given in Westminster Hall, Friday, 17 September 2010. Text taken from BBC Website.

orthodoxy, the call to walk humbly with God, to live a life of service and selflessness. If that is not our vocation then all this, all this beauty of holiness, attired in glorious raiment, the music of angels is little more than an incestuous indulgence, self-referential and self-regarding. What saves it from that, what prevents it from being a mere dumb show, is that here we are remembering Jesus Christ.

The very centre and heartbeat of the Christian life and worship is the perpetual offering of the Passion and Death of the risen and ascended Lord before the throne of God: the offering that will go on until time ends. The altar in heaven is not one of stone and wood: the sacrifice in heaven is not one of carnal, creaturely things, bulls or goats of the old dispensation, rather the altar and the sacrifice alike are the abiding offering of the humanity of Christ which the Son of God, stooping a little lower than the angels, took upon himself for the salvation and redemption of the world and of his people, among whom we are numbered, in the Incarnation and which he effected and consummated in his Passion and Death, and which he sealed forever in his Resurrection and Ascension.

And here we are conjoined, a living, priestly people, with those who have died in Christ, "with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven,"⁴ undivided and indivisible, joined and gathered in this offering. All the sacrificial elements of the Christian life, the life to which we are all called, individually and corporately, are gathered and offered: all the glory, all the pains, all the joys, all the pity, all the works of our hands and the prayers of our heart. A former Principal of this House put it like this, "There are the sorrows of Christ's people, the troubles and perils of nations, the sorrowful sighing of prisoners, the miseries of widows and orphans and all that are desolate and bereaved, the necessities of strangers and travelers, the helplessness and sadness of the weak and sickly, the weakness of the aged and of children, the trials and aspirations of young men and maidens. With the body of the Lord we offer all that is our own, our praise and thanksgiving, our supplications for ourselves and our intercessions for others, our confessions of sin and our resolutions of amendment."⁵ Even allowing for the language of an earlier era, maidens are pretty scarce in Oxford, this reminds us forcibly of the power and the force of what it is that we do this morning.

We who keep the feast with Jesus will be raised with him, to be with him, to join him in his heavenly work. The Eucharist both expresses and shapes our lives. The Christian vocation is a sacrificial one and the Eucharist is the Church's sacrifice. Here the Church, in our expression of it, presents to the Father the life of Jesus. It is his Body: it is his Blood that is made present on the altar. It is the offering of all that is Him, of all his life and ministry, of the completeness of his perfect vocation, all that he has been, all that he is, all that he can ever be, all brought to its fulfillment in his Passion and Resurrection, and it is that which we plead in this re-presentation, this anamnesis, this bringing into the present of that one, perfect, unrepeatable sacrifice. In this sacrifice we are able to unite ourselves with him and to offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, to the Father.

But here we are presented with a challenge. Every time we celebrate this sacrifice, every time we make our communion, every time we pray before the Blessed Sacrament, we are faced with a challenge. It is the challenge of Our Lord himself who recalls to our minds what he is and what he has done. We are challenged by the stainlessness of his purity and how we soil his image within us by our failings, the completeness of his holiness and the incompleteness of our endeavours to live holy lives, the greatness of his

⁴ Book of Common Prayer

⁵ Darwell Stone, *The Eucharistic Sacrifice* Wipf and Stock Publishers [2006] pp 24 – 26

self-sacrifice and our timid and partial offering of ourselves, the totality of his offering and his love, and too often our lack of love. In this Eucharist as in every Eucharist we become, literally, Christ-bearers, filled with the power and the possibilities of his life, able, if we accept the challenge, if we take it seriously, able to use that power, to reproduce its splendour in the working out of our own lives.

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