

**Pusey House Oxford**  
**All Saints' 2010**  
**The Dean of Westminster**

*Matthew 5: 1-12*

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The parish church my family attended when I was a boy had a rather fine east window by Sir Ninian Comper. I was an undergraduate at Durham where the cathedral is adorned with Comper's tester over St Cuthbert's tomb. The cathedral where I was ordained also had an east window by Comper. Much later I served in a church built by Comper, not far from Upper Norwood, where he lived. Now I find myself the custodian of a church Comper beautified with a series of windows on the north side of the nave. So amongst the pleasures of preaching in Pusey House is being surrounded by the decorative scheme of Ninian Comper.

Comper's nave windows in Westminster Abbey were installed progressively between 1909 and 1962. His ashes are buried in the north aisle of the nave. Each of these windows shows a king with an abbot or bishop. The westernmost window depicts King Edgar with St Dunstan, who as bishop of London in 960 brought monks from his former abbey in Glastonbury and founded, or perhaps re-founded, a Benedictine abbey on Thorney Island. The story goes on: St Edward King and Confessor with the church he built in 1065 and Abbot Edwin; Henry III and Abbot de Ware whose great new church was consecrated in 1269 as a fitting shrine for St Edward; Edward I, who with Abbot Wenlock continued his father's work; Edward III with former abbot, Cardinal Simon Langham, whose bequest allowed the next pair, Richard II with Abbot Litlington, to

begin building the nave; and lastly, with Abbot Colchester, Henry V, king for only nine years but who contributed to the work on the nave and whose glorious chantry chapel is by Edward's shrine. The images stop before the completion of the nave and new Lady Chapel by Henry VII and Abbot Islip and of the building of the west window and towers under George II.

These depictions of collaboration between Church and State are near the heart of the story of Westminster Abbey. Edward the Confessor, when he decided to build his Palace and to build a great Abbey and Minster to the west of London, surely wanted his reign to be subject to the rule of God Almighty and to be buttressed by the Church. Each successive king glorifying and extending the Church confirmed the same position: State supporting the Church; Church supporting the State.

Comper is a rather recherché taste these days. His Wymondham Abbey reredos is very remarkable, as is his chapel for the All Saints' Sisters just north of the M25 near St Albans, in what is now the Westminster diocesan pastoral centre. He has his oddities: for example he depicts our Lord Jesus Christ in glory as beardless and blond. Perhaps he intends to offer us an ideal of the perfect man shorn of particular human characteristics.

St Gregory the Great's famous encounter with English slaves in the market place in Rome, of whom he said, 'Non Angli sed angeli', is said to have inspired him to send St Augustine and his companions on an English mission. I have often heard his words interpreted as a reference to the boys' looking like angels because they were blond. But this is to miss the point that the boys themselves were angels, regardless of how

they looked: messengers from God, saying to Gregory, as the man from Macedonia said to St Paul in his dream, 'Come over and help us.'

And surely Comper misses the point when he depicts the risen Jesus as blond. Our Lord Jesus Christ shares our humanity in all its messy particularity and demonstrates its capacity, our capacity, for unity with God. The wonderful news All Saints' Day offers us is that human beings like us, weak, wilful, blind and stupid, can follow where Christ has led, by God's grace, and can share in the glory of heaven. Our Lord Jesus Christ who shares our human flesh opens for us the gateway to heaven. Today's Gospel offers us a challenge not to live for ourselves, but to follow the way of Christ, the way of the cross, of self-denial, of self-sacrifice.

This presents me with something of a conundrum: on the one hand there is a powerful image in Westminster Abbey of mutually supportive Church and State; on the other hand there is the challenge in the Gospel reading today not to follow the way of the world, of the incompatibility between Church and world.

The dilemma is sharply illustrated for us here. The recent beatification of John Henry Newman, with Pusey and Keble the initiator of the Oxford Movement, reminds us of the problem, which also underlies some of the most difficult debates facing the Church and those of us who find ourselves strongly personally affected by them. The political reforms of the Church which moved the triumvirate to action seem to the mind of today pretty unexceptionable. The scandal in Ireland that led the Whigs in 1833 to propose amendment was that the parish churches were empty but the pockets of their clergy were full, whilst the catholic churches were full and the pockets of their clergy empty. The scandal in England and

Wales that led the Tories to propose amendment in 1835 was that the new cities were destitute of churches and pastoral care whilst the cathedrals were stuffed with idle, rich clergy. Sir Robert Peel, himself a staunch Anglican, acted then, apparently against the Church, on the grounds that reform was better than disestablishment. The way of the world could be seen in that moment as salvation for the Church.

I was delighted to receive the Pope at the Abbey; to experience the strength of his relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury, to sense his delight in the Abbey and to feel his gentle warmth. In Westminster Hall, he spoke of St Thomas More but he also spoke of other heroes of Christian life and of the influence for good of the people of our nation and its ways in the world. He spoke of Great Britain's gift to the world of the common law and of democracy, of David Livingstone and Florence Nightingale. He emphasised the richness of the tradition of faith in this land in its engagement with public life. His simple message, repeated time and again, was not to lose this rich inheritance of faith that has been so influential in the life of the nation but to recover its significance and to apply it to life in the world today.

I found myself reflecting on the impact of the doctrine of the immediate universal jurisdiction of the Pope, expressed through the power of the Roman curia, and on Pope Benedict's emphasis on the teaching authority, the *magisterium*, of the Church, the *Ecclesia docens*. In beatifying Newman, the Pope honoured a theologian who in 1859 published some thoughts on the means by which the Church is preserved from errancy. In his paper *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, Newman reflected on the importance of the *consensus fidelium*, the 'agreement of the faithful': 'the body of the faithful is one of

the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and their *consensus* through Christendom is the voice of the Infallible Church.’ ‘One man’, he said, ‘will lay more stress on one aspect of doctrine, another on another; for myself, I am accustomed to lay great stress on the *consensus fidelium*.’ Newman’s immediate context for writing was the 1854 dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, where the Pope called in aid the popular piety of the faithful. His chief example was the period of Arian controversy when, he maintained, the faithful upheld the truth whilst the *magisterium* went astray.

That led me to think of one issue of the influence of the world on the Church’s moral teaching. In 1967, Pope Paul VI took a firm stand on procreation as *the* purpose of sexual intercourse, when his encyclical *Humanae vitae* outlawed artificial means of contraception. In practice, it appears, the faithful have not accorded that teaching their *consensus*, but the *magisterium* makes no response. The bishops of the Anglican Communion at the Lambeth Conference of 1930 took a key step when they came to the cautious conclusion that they should not oppose the use of artificial forms of contraception in certain circumstances.

In truth, the engagement between Church and State, between the Church and the world, for the individual Christian between the way of the world and the way of Christ, is bound always to be tense, complicated, a matter for negotiation. The irony of the pharisaic challenge to Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar is that his challengers are themselves carrying the hated coinage, symbol of their people’s subjection to Roman rule, in the temple, the very heart and the most powerful symbol of their faith. Some commentators have sought to argue that Jesus meant to suggest that, since everything is from God, even our money, then everything is owed to God whether or not it bears Caesar’s image, but surely the natural

meaning is that the citizen owes the State loyalty; this is reflected in the instruction of St Peter himself to his fellow Christians, even those suffering persecution, to honour the emperor.

Most of us will live in an uneasy compromise with the world, despite the romantic attraction of the way of the world-denier. Who can fail to be impressed by St Antony and the monks of the desert or by St Francis and St Clare and their followers, or in their different ways by Latimer and Ridley, by St Edmund Campion, St John Southworth and St Margaret Clitherow, by the hermit and the anchoress? ‘Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. [Hebrews 11: 36-38]’

As we seek to follow the saints, may their prayers help us and their example inspire us to be faithful to the way of Christ on our unsteady journey through this life, and may mutual attention be key to the engagement between Church and State, between the Church and the world.