

Homily for the Saturday after the Third Sunday after Epiphany

A sermon preached at the High Mass for the Friends of Pusey House at All Saints' Church, Margaret Street, London, on Saturday 27 January 2024, by The Venerable Dr Edward Dowler, Archdeacon of Hastings and Priest-in-Charge of St John the Evangelist, Crowborough

ROMANS 12:16b-21; ST. MATTHEW 8

RELIGION has more negative consequences than positive'. This was the view expressed in a recent survey conducted by the University of Birmingham. 68% of people who did not identify as being religious themselves were recorded as having said it, along with a perhaps more surprising 32% of people who did. This news was enthusiastically seized on by atheist commentators such as Professor Alice Roberts of Humanists UK as evidence for the harmful effects of religious belief. Such an understanding was famously summed up twenty years ago by the late author and polemicist Christopher Hitchens in his book *God is not Great: 'Religion Poisons Everything'*.

I always wonder what such commentators make of biblical passages such as Paul's exhortations to the Romans in today's Epistle reading: striking in their beauty, simplicity and evident goodness. To live in harmony with one another; to associate with those of low estate; not to be conceited; not to repay evil for evil; to live in peace with all; not to practice vengeance on others; to feed and give drink even to our enemies; 'Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good'.

But it is important to note that views such as those of Professor Roberts and Mr Hitchens do not go uncontested. In recent years, a number of writers, often coming from outside the Church, most recently perhaps Tom Holland in his book *Dominion*, have noted that the sort of moral values that Paul describes, which we now often think of as simply mainstream liberal and human values, did not come into being by accident. Far from being universally acknowledged, moral priorities such as compassion, forgiveness, and care for the weak were almost unknown – or at least very well hidden – in the all-pervasive brutality of the ancient world into which Christianity was born. It was the influence of Jesus, the Gospel and the Church that brought them to prominence and made them seem mainstream and obvious in the way that even now they continue to appear to us.

Moreover, it is not really clear that such values easily survive in situations and places where the Christian faith is suppressed or marginalised; for example, in societies ruled by the grisly atheistic dictatorships of the twentieth century, or in the sort of faceless technocracy that has been so scarily foreshadowed by the current Post Office scandal. I have often been haunted by a sentence from David Bentley Hart's book *Atheist Delusions* on what he calls 'the Christian revolution'. Hart writes that 'if... the

“human” as we now understand it is the positive invention of Christianity, might it not be the case that a culture that has become truly post-Christian will also, ultimately, become posthuman?’ That does indeed seem all too likely.

Having said all of this, there is perhaps a complementary angle which we should also recognise. This is that the reason that Christianity *was* so successful in promoting the sort of values and virtues that St Paul encourages in the Roman Christians is simply that they are true and, when they were preached, people recognised it.

In his 1943 lectures entitled *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis writes about what he describes as the *Tao*, often called ‘Natural Law’ or traditional morality; those habits of moral thought that I have been describing. His point is that this morality has not just been invented by anyone, but rather that it draws its strength and its compelling power from the fact that it is, at some level, ingrained in the universe. It is, writes Lewis, ‘something we cannot neglect. It is the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are’. In an appendix, Lewis elucidates the *Tao* with numerous examples drawn from different philosophical traditions. They are not far away from those to which St Paul exhorts the Roman Christians in our reading: beneficence, justice, mercy, care for others, honesty, and good faith. If, through technological advance or scientific discovery, we find a way of stepping outside them, we go against the grain of our humanity; to use a modern expression, we *cancel* ourselves. Of those who do step outside, Lewis writes, and please excuse the exclusive language, ‘It is not that they are bad men. They are not men at all. Stepping outside the *Tao*, they have stepped into the void. Nor are their subjects necessarily unhappy men. They are not men at all: they are artefacts. Man’s final conquest has proved to be the abolition of Man’.

So, we end up with a slightly nuanced point. On the one hand, the sort of universal human values that we heard about in our reading simply are *true*: they are ingrained in the world and in the hearts of men and women. But, on the other hand, while they are true, they are not *obvious*, not always self-evident. As C. S. Lewis himself argued, it is quite possible for different cultures – including cultures that call themselves ‘Christian’, sometimes even the Church herself – to forget about them or to sideline them. And in our own time and our own culture, it is quite possible that, for example, modern technological developments or various current patterns of thought may once again cause them to be lost with disastrous consequences and cease to be so self-evident as we may currently think they are.

‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’, wrote T.S. Eliot in *The Wasteland*, so what are the fragments that might shore us up against the calamitous future that will come if Professor Roberts and the late Mr Hitchens have their way? May I suggest three ...

First of all, there is the extraordinary clarity of the Christian scriptures; of the teaching of Jesus Himself of course, but also of the person who has often been a great modern bogeyman: St Paul. His words ring through, to remind us of what we know to be true but can so easily forget: ‘condescend towards men of low estate; recompense no man evil for evil.... Live peaceably with all ... avenge not yourselves ... if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink ... overcome evil with good’.

Second, the formational role of the Christian community which – always imperfectly – is nonetheless able to school its members in what is true and good and

beautiful. And it is wonderful in this respect that Pusey House is currently so strong in the sort of intentional Christian formation that we desperately need as times change and we run into danger of forgetting those patterns of thought and action that *are* fundamentally ingrained in us but *are not* always obvious.

And third and most of all, there is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who is not just a teacher and exemplar of the super-enhanced values of the *Tao* that Paul enumerates, and that the Christian tradition has consistently taught and inculcated. Rather, He is a living person who, as we read in the gospels, embodied them in Himself, and prayed to the last for forgiveness for His enemies. In His death, He has absorbed into Himself the ferocity of a world in which compassion, forgiveness and charity have been forgotten and in His risen life, through the Holy Spirit, He continues to pour out these gifts on His people. Whether in London or in Oxford, or wherever we may be, may we look to him more urgently and more hopefully to draw forth strength and life.

In our gospel reading, we have heard how a representative of the old, violent pagan order must surely have seen its limitations when he brought his paralysed servant to the Lord. And Jesus said unto the centurion, “Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.” And his servant was healed in that same hour.’