

A Sermon Preached by the Bishop of London at Westcott House
25th November 2009

The Collect for Christ the King:

Eternal father whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord and King: keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace, and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet. Amen

The octave of Christ the King this year is a time for contemplating the claims of Christ and the significance of the Church in the realm of public truth as we near the end of the first decade of this 21st century - a century of mingled promise and peril for the whole human race.

There is a good deal of eco-gloom about.

At the end of the summer in the Guardian there was a remarkable exchange between two writers who have spent years contemplating the perils of the 21st century.

Paul Kingsnorth asserted that “the civilisation we are part of is hitting the buffers at full speed and it is too late to stop it.” “The writing is on the wall for industrial society and no amount of ethical shopping or determined protesting is going to change that now.” “The challenge is not how to shore up a crumbling empire with wave machines and global summits but to start thinking how we are going to live through its fall, and what we can learn from its collapse.”

George Monbiot replied “Like you I have become ever gloomier about our chances of avoiding the crash you predict. For the past few years I have been almost professionally optimistic, exhorting people to keep fighting, knowing that to say there is no hope is to make it so. I still have some faith in our ability to make rational decisions based on evidence but it is waning.”

In response, Paul Kingsnorth has launched “The Dark Mountain Project” which is based on eight so called “Principles of Uncivilisation”. These include at points 2 and 3 “We reject the faith which holds that the converging crises of our times can be reduced to a set of “problems” in need of technological or political “solutions”. “We believe that the roots of these crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. We intend to challenge the stories which underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress: the myth of human centrality: and the myth of our separation from “nature”. These myths are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths.”

It may be that the church has tended to present a picture of Christ too domesticated and diminished to be of much use to such perturbed spirits.

This is a season of the year when much use is made in the lectionary of the Book of Revelation. John the Divine sets the sacrifice of Christ and the testimony of the Christian martyrs against a huge cosmic canvas.

In our own day we have been given a vivid account of the cosmic drama by contemporary science. It seems that we are involved in a five act drama. In a series of irreversible transformations the history of the universe has unfolded from its beginnings about 13.7 billion years ago. Act I is the galactic story. Act II is the formation of planet Earth just far enough away from our sun to avoid frying and not so far as to become a sterile rock. Act III is the story of the birth of life on Earth with Act IV concerned with the story of homo sapiens as we emerged some 160,000 years ago from Africa to colonise the globe.

The evolutionary story has a material and physical aspect but also a psycho-spiritual aspect. We are as the Bible and Darwin agree creatures of the dust – star dust in fact; we are participants in a web of life; humans are the universe reflecting on and celebrating life in conscious self awareness.

The problem is that the knowledge which has delivered such great power over the earth has been generated from an “objective” way of observing the world which has tended to divorce us from a sense of inter connectedness with nature. Dominance has been substituted for interconnectedness and we have come to see the earth in a god-forsaken way as a mere theatre for human willing and exploitation, with a diminished awareness that our well being is involved in the well being of the earth.

Act V of our five act drama is just beginning and it will decide whether humanity is yet another dead end in the unfolding story of life or whether promise will predominate and peril will be surmounted. The President of the Royal Society recently published a book about the prospects for the human race worryingly entitled “Our Final Century” – without a question mark – although he has ascribed this to a publisher’s error.

Shall we develop the wisdom to channel the power we have acquired from the scientific knowledge and discoveries of the 20th century? Where indeed, to quote T.S.Eliot, is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge and the knowledge we have lost in information.

We live at a time when science and religion are commonly perceived to have declared a truce on the basis of mutual irrelevance. Facts and values are divorced because of the rigid exclusion of any notion of purpose in modern science and this has led to a divorce between the kinds of truth which can be entertained in public and the private spheres of life.

A significant and influential strand of Protestant thinking has abandoned the realm of fact and public truth for a private sphere of subjective values where we can enjoy Christian fellowship and undertake courses of personal growth. But the claim that Christ is the light that reveals the whole of reality and the life that endures for ever has been silenced and reduced to just one of the possible varieties of religious experience.

Mr Gladstone pointed out in his great book *The State in its Relation to the Church* that ancient Rome had no difficulty in assimilating many local gods and religions. “Thus it continued while the worship of the Deity was but a conjecture ... but when the rising of the Sun of Righteousness had given reality to the subjective forms of faith, had made actual and solid truth the common inheritance of all men, then the religion of Christ became unlike other new creeds an object of cruel persecution.” This is of course the context in which St John the Divine was writing.

John’s emphasis is on the testimony of the Christian community. The Biblical text comes to life as it is studied and expressed as part of the venture of Christian living in the Church, celebrating and substantiating the truths of the Incarnation and the Trinity. As St Paul says in his letter to Timothy, “the church of the living God is the pillar and ground of the truth.”

Because of the divorce between fact and value, public truth and private opinion, ours is ironically an age of credulity. Part of what is being demanded of the church in the 21st century is to be a bastion of rationality in the midst of the cults of unreason. Conversion is not only a matter of the heart and the will but also of the mind and here you are preparing yourselves for this most joyful and demanding life of being midwives in the conversion of consumers to life as citizens and contemplatives.

In Revelation the great multitudes, from all nations and kindreds, people and tongues, members of the Church, stand before the throne and cry out “Salvation/deliverance belongs to God”. Too often we have seen salvation exclusively in terms of individuals. That is of course vital but the Bible shows us the individual person realistically as someone always involved in relationships with other human beings and with the world of nature. We can perish in a world and a human community that is atomised but we are saved together.

At the end of the Divine Comedy, Dante describes his vision of divine reality – “all the scattered leaves of the universe bound by love in one volume”. Such is the origin and the purpose of the Church and it is the calling of this House to explore, celebrate and substantiate this truth.