

The State We Are In

A Sermon for Lent 1

Deuteronomy 26 vv 1-11, Romans 10 vv 8-13, Luke 4 vv 1-13

Twenty five years ago, when I was a young curate, some mothers-to-be among our parishioners complained that the Maternity Unit at the local hospital would not allow them to call their husbands, “their husbands.” Unmarried mothers were in no way to be made to feel different from wives. This episode provides an example of each of three trends in the way we are now governed: we have to be non-judgmental; traditional family life is not to be regarded as the norm; bossy state-funded professionals will tell you how you should behave, what you can and cannot say, and, indeed, how you ought to think.

I believe that the Prime Minister was wrong when he claimed that the spate of gun crime in our inner cities is not a symptom of a sick society. Since the Second World War, we, as a society, have lost respect for the three great institutions which should bind us together as a community: the family, the Queen, and all those in authority under her; and the Church. (I should say that I am using the phrase “the Queen” here in the sense that, as head of state, she represents authority in this nation. We could, of course, choose to have an elected head of state, but this would make no difference at all unless we had respect for what he or she represents.)

Family is based on unconditional love. When a couple marry, they promise *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part*. This is the same kind of love that mothers have for their children – and hopefully fathers too. It is the kind of love we ought to have for our parents and for our brothers and sisters. This kind of love is the gravitational force which holds society together.

You might say that love like this only exists in cloud cuckoo land and that real families are places of conflict, infidelity, jealousy and sometimes violence. Ordinary people are, however, capable of true love. We get things wrong. Sometimes we go very wrong, but part of love is repentance and part of love is forgiveness. We can say sorry and we can forgive.

We have become so concerned to be non-judgmental that we are unable to say that a couple who marry for life, look after their own children and other members of the family, and sacrifice self on the altar of caring for others, have done a better thing than those who have brought children into the world without committing to one another or have deserted their wives or husbands, or who have put their own perceived needs before the needs of the people they claim to love, and to whom they made supposedly life-long vows.

Sex in marriage is sacramental. It is an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of a couple’s love. Commitment-free sex may be fun, but it devalues one of God’s most precious gifts to the human race and robs sex of its potential for satisfying our deepest need – the need to be loved for ever. Commitment-free sex all too often leads to the birth of children who cannot rely on the love of both their parents.

We have also come to rate material wealth above nearly everything else. People are judged by what money they earn. So any paid job, how ever humdrum, is seen as more worthwhile

than looking after one's own children. Moreover our children have grown up in a society where their own worth is measured in terms of having the right trainers and the trendiest computer games and going on the coolest holidays. So children, whose parents have worked shorter hours in order to spend more time with them, appear to be deprived when compared with children, whose parents have worked every hour God sends to give them bedrooms full of electronic toys and wardrobes full of designer clothing.

Mothers come under a great deal of social pressure to put their young children in nurseries, which are increasingly run, not by family and friends, as they used to be, but by professionals, following a government sponsored curriculum. Thus parents can go out and get a "proper" job as opposed to merely caring for the next generation and little Henry and Henrietta can climb a couple more rungs of the developmental ladder a few months before other children who stay at home with Mum all day. If parents opt out of sending their children to nursery, their children are thought to be at risk of missing out on an opportunity to learn and to make friends and there is also the threat that they may not be offered a place in the infant school of their choice when they at last reach the ripe old age of five years.

Under government plans, schools are to open fifty hours a week, with activities laid on before and after the existing school day. Thus parents will be set free to do real work for money in offices and factories and the state gets to determine what children will learn and experience for pretty well all their waking hours.

For decades now, at eleven years of age, many children have had to leave their old friends behind them and travel to giant impersonal schools where the teachers need photographs at parents' evenings because they are unlikely otherwise even to be able to recognise the children they are asked to talk about. Such schools struggle to become communities and it is hard for children to build lifelong friendships with other children whom their families know.

If you doubt that it is public policy to undermine traditional family, consider the Civil Partnership Act. If I were gay, I could set up house with my homosexual lover and register a civil partnership which would enable him to keep the house when I die, just as if he were my wife. But, if I set up house with my sister I cannot do anything to protect her from having to sell up or lose the tenancy on my death, even if she were to be made homeless as a result.

A very high proportion of robberies and violent crimes, including murder, are connected with illegal drug-taking and/or alcohol abuse. Why do so many young people feel the need to get out of their heads on drugs? Could it be that their lives are so bleak because they do not know real love – the love of family, the love of friends, the love of God?

So much for family. What of the Queen and all those set in authority under her? We live in a society in which, if an adult uses physical force to prevent a child or a teenager from committing a crime, the adult is more likely to be punished than the young criminal. And that goes for teachers and policemen as well as for ordinary people. So, many young people grow up believing that they are literally untouchable whatever they get up to. In fact, in many parts of the UK, teenagers are more likely to respect and fear the criminals on the estates than the police, social workers or teachers.

The Church teaches that all power is derived from God. The laws and rules governing nations are derived from the Law of God, not the arbitrary will of human rulers. Human rulers are answerable to God for administering just laws justly. This being the case, we are bound to obey the law, not principally because of the punishment we fear if we do not, but for conscience' sake.

Modern secular society believes, however, that ethical rules are not universal and absolute, but culturally relative. Different cultures have different norms. Laws and rules are human inventions and are enforced by peer pressure or by force. You are not allowed to say that modern British values are better than, for example, Saudi Arabian values, because moral values are all relative to culture.

This means that the authorities in this country cannot rely on universal moral principles, backed by religion, to confront such practices as forced marriage or female circumcision. "It is their culture; who are we to say they are wrong?" Lacking universal moral absolutes, we are all uneasily conscious that power is arbitrary and that the rule of law depends on force rather than the ability to justify itself in moral debate. A young black man, cautioned for possessing cannabis, might think that it is just an attempt to enforce white ethical norms on black culture. A student caught illegally down-loading music might say that the police are being used to protect bloated capitalist record producers from poor people exercising their legitimate right to enjoy the bands of their choice. Government cannot rely on the principle that it is enforcing universal moral standards because it does not believe that there are universal moral standards. Ordinary people, therefore, may conclude that they only need to obey the Law if they are afraid of being caught and punished, not for conscience' sake.

It is not surprising, then, that the Government's reflex reaction when confronted with any public order problem is simply this: more surveillance, more laws, harsher punishments. Being morally bankrupt, it has no other resources.

But what of Church, the third and greatest force binding our community together? Surely the Church bears witness to the universal moral Law, the Law of God summed up in the two great commandments to love God and neighbour. Surely the Church supports the authority of the state while providing the whole nation with a moral compass. Surely the Church sustains family life. Doesn't the Church bear witness that human beings will never find fulfilment in money, material possessions or casual sex, and certainly not in drunken or drug-induced oblivion? Doesn't the Church offer every human being the gift of eternal life, joy in all its fulness? Doesn't the Church have the tools for reconciling humanity to God? Isn't the Christian Gospel the key to all humankind's problems?

Surely, but remember the Parable of the Sower. Jesus talks about the seed which fell among thorns. *The thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.* This, He says, is like people. *They hear the word, and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.* Doesn't this describe so many Christians in England today? Aren't we unfruitful because, although we hear the word, *the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other*

things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful? We are unable to transform modern society because we have been absorbed by it. We are supposed to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the leaven that leavens the lump, but too many of us have given up being salt, light and leaven and have effectively become earth, world and lump!

So what is to be done? Repentance would be a good start. It is no use blaming other people or bemoaning a past golden age. Maybe things were better in the past; maybe they weren't. We have to live in the present and build the future. So we need to repent of our lack of commitment to God and His world. We also need to pray for the Church and the world. When we pray, we ally ourselves with Jesus, the divine Word, Who sustains and transforms God's whole creation. We need to do what we can to influence public policy, to bring up our own families, to play our own part in the community. We may, for example, be school governors or help with guides or scouts or youth clubs. We need to make clear that, as Christians, we live by Christian principles. Public worship and private prayer are our top priorities. We, ourselves, try to live by the Law of God as we learn it from the Bible and the Church's teaching. Spiritual things really matter more to us than material things. Money is no more than a means to an end. People come before things.

It isn't going to be easy or instantaneous. We are commemorating this year the 200th anniversary of the end of the slave trade. The slave trade didn't end easily or quickly. Wilberforce and his companions laboured for decades, spending huge amounts of time and money and enduring a great deal of hostility. They not only had to argue with the evil people who operated the trade, but also with "realists" who thought that the British economy couldn't survive without slavery and misguided people who managed to convince themselves that negroes were not fully human or that there was biblical warrant for the institution of slavery. Much blood was spilt ending the slave trade, as well as money and words. Sometimes those liberating the slaves inadvertently made things worse. A freed man starving because he couldn't find a job might be worse off than a slave with a full belly. So ending slavery was not simple, quick or easy. Indeed there is still slavery in the world and still work for the anti-slavers to do.

Sorting out the problems of British society won't be simple, quick or easy, but you and I can make a real difference if we commit ourselves to God and His world. The greater our commitment, the greater the difference we can make.