

Homily St John's Church Bath

17th Sunday of the Year 2011.

I Kings 3:5, 7-12; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13:44-52.

Phone hacking – personal information up for sale – politicians coveying up to Press barons – senior policemen accepting freebies. Its not just grubby but makes us cry ‘Didn’t they know that all this was simply wrong?’

There is talk from beyond these shores of the British losing their moral compass! It looks as if, even those in the highest places, have bought into the belief that we can each make up our own right or wrong. We can ‘do our own thing’ what, as they say ‘we are comfortable with’. It is enough to make us cry, with the Murdoch Press in its more pious moments ‘ Back to Traditional Values! Back to the 10 Commandments!’

But let us take a deep breath and go quietly to one of our old English parish churches. Over the years their furnishings and adornment have changed a lot. In medieval times your eyes would have been caught by the Rood screen with its figure of Christ nailed to the cross, often with his mother and St John on either side of him. At the Reformation all changed. Images were rejected and, in place of the Cross, went up the Royal Coat of Arms and the 10 Commandments. That, you could say, was a pretty firm affirmation of Law and Order. Just as in the prison cell of the Bishop’s palace at Wells, malefactors had to sit and gaze on those 10 Commandments up there on the wall - all very good for them and, no doubt, all very good for us.

But, take away the Cross and you have taken away what is central to our faith. This is what it is all about – the sign of the generous love of God. We are not here to thumb through rule books and tick boxes about whether we have obeyed these rules or not. – We are here to be confronted by the image of God in Christ Jesus so that we should, in the words of St Paul, ourselves

become ‘true images of that Son’, become a family in which Jesus is the ‘eldest’ of our brothers and, in which, through him, we catch the contagion of God’s glory which is that love. This is the aim of it all – the treasure worth everything, the jewel for which the wise merchant sells his all.

Now that does not by-pass the 10 Commandments. As Jesus shows, it takes them even further. Now it is not just a matter of loving our friends but loving enemies as well. Now it is not just a matter of not killing each other but also of not treating one another with contempt. Now it is not just a matter of avoiding adultery but also avoiding that lust which leads there. As Jesus sums it up: ‘You must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.’

That is to aim pretty high! It certainly leaves no room for complacency or some comfortable ‘do-it-yourself’ morality. That radical love of Jesus on the Cross challenges not just our grosser sins but our respectable and correct behaviour as well. We are not as good as we think we are or, as St Paul bluntly puts it: ‘All have sinned and fallen short.’

But in our faith, with this aiming so high, goes a great practicality, down-to-earthness. For Jesus preached, not a beautiful ideal in the skies, but was himself the Word, the Ideal made flesh, and this Word is to go on being made flesh, realised in this world at this time. It is not just a matter of having your ethical code to wave; it is a matter of doing the right thing here and now. And this is what young Solomon saw. Called to the highest office, he knew that he was unskilled in leadership and so he prayed ‘for a heart to understand how to discern between good and evil.’ It was not a rulebook or some authority to shout orders at him that he most needed but his own ‘discerning judgement’. For, as Jesus shows in the Gospel, the ‘dragnet’ of the kingdom hauls in a great mixture of fish, good and bad. Yes, there will be a sorting –out at the end of time but, here and now, we have to put up with a lack of clarity, a lot of mixture in

which it is often difficult to see the ‘right’ way forward. So we all need that ‘discerning judgement’, what St Thomas Aquinas saw in the virtue of ‘Prudence’, which is not a matter of being cautious and playing for safety, but about the ability to use mind and imagination to see what, in this situation, is that which is to be done, what can move things in the direction of God’s rule.

As we focus our eyes on Christ nailed to the Cross and see love ‘so amazing, so divine’, there is no room for complacency or self-righteousness. The followers of Christ cannot preach to a naughty world from some lofty perch. In these recent events we have had to remember that cash for a new cathedral won Rupert Murdoch a papal knighthood, and cash for a papal visit won the Murdochs an audience with the Pope. Before the Cross-, we have to learn a new honesty and humility. But here is found, not only judgement. There is healing as well. ‘Father forgive them – they know not what they do.’ And with that, we, in all our failures and fallings short, are taken as we are and drawn deeper into the sharing of that love.

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