

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS - MANCHESTER DIOCESAN SYNOD - NOV 2010

Members of Synod, since we last met, the Coalition Government has begun to address the effects of the recession and the huge deficit – that, in addition to their deeply serious sociological implications, continue to have deleterious repercussions on diocesan property values and our financial reserves.

Whatever our views about current government policy (and this would apply to whatever government were in power) it is important to remember that the Church of England is not an arm of the opposition – nor is it a wing of the government. And in these still early days of the development of coalition policies, the influence of the church and its allied Christian and other-faith communities may be the more readily noted if, at the highest levels, our critiques are conveyed through the diplomacy of conversation rather than via blunt hectoring. That does not mean the Church should be mute – and Archbishop Rowan in particular has shown that – but rather that we should exercise some wary wisdom over deciding what matters require the public expression of our high anxiety and deep concern.

At Bishopscourt I am currently hosting several evenings with the 600 or so churchwardens of the diocese. Sometimes, when welcoming them, I point out a painting in our hall. It was done by an art student, taken from a photograph of a scene he had not himself witnessed, and it shows me leaning down to a sheep. The student has entitled the picture: “Compassion”. In fact, the original photo was taken on a visit I made to an urban farm, on my way to a church service. I was wearing my cassock and had my crook with me – so my hosts wanted a picture of me “in shepherd mode” in the field where the few sheep were. No sooner had I entered the field than a sheep came up to me. I leaned forward to stroke the sheep. At that moment, the sheep, spying that I was wearing a wooden pectoral cross, grabbed it and rapidly began chewing it. The picture is of me desperately trying to push off the wretched animal. There is not a shred of compassion there at all!

Compassion, as we know, is a significant word in the bible – noted in the Old Testament as a quality both divine and human; with its use expanded in the New Testament to be a high feature of Christian discipleship. The Gospels tell us on several occasions that “the Lord had compassion” on an individual or a multitude; and in the parable of the Prodigal Son, to take but one example, the father in welcoming the lost son’s return “had compassion and ran and fell on his neck”. And through the epistles, 1Peter3:8 for instance, we are often urged to “be of one mind, having compassion one of another”.

When the Church offers public critique on current affairs, its message is authentic when it is discernibly rooted in Christian values. The government has chosen to use the word “fairness” in promoting many of its policies, and has sought to advance a quasi-moral and ethical debate on that basis. But fair can be a weasel word. For, although it means just

and equitable, it is also used in the sense of being mediocre and middling. A further definition of “fair” is unbiased – a concept that fits uneasily with the Christian gospel in which the manifesto of Jesus in Luke 4 points to what has been, and must remain, a considerable feature of Anglican and other Christian ministries: namely a bias to the poor.

Political use of the word “fairness” can encourage envy; and in its facile implication of the desirability of equal treatment, can make worse the lot of the already disadvantaged; whereas, from a Christian perspective, the litmus test for a society or nation is how the weakest members are treated. If the Church’s message is “don’t cut compassion from society” then that is a message that is indisputably and credibly Christian.

The truth is that compassion is not always fair – it may mean paying the bus ride for a child to go to school, it may mean providing more support for the weak, it must mean recognising that whilst, clearly, rigorous cuts must be made, those who are especially vulnerable merit exception. Of course this is difficult, and of course there are those who play the system in a manner that is wholly unacceptable and needs to be stopped. But, as Martin Miller has indicated in this month’s “Church and Society News” the current economic and social crises threaten to widen some equality gaps that might have closed in better times. I have to say that in all the talk about fairness, I have not heard the words cuts and compassion in the same sentence at all. As a Church, we have a duty to speak up for the voiceless, to protect the vulnerable – indeed, the blessing I use on every occasion at the service for my Parish Pilgrimages defines our Christian calling in these words: “Strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honour all people”.

Whilst the Church of England, at a national level, has a particular role underlining the importance of that gospel imperative, each diocese has its own responsibilities under God to address in appropriate manner these matters as they affect local communities. As a member of the Manchester Partnership Board, I received the monthly Manchester Monitor – a dashboard of data and indicators that provide updated analytical snapshots of the economic wellbeing of Greater Manchester. It shows that, as far as Greater Manchester is concerned (and that does not include that important part of this diocese in Rossendale), although there is less employment based on the public sector than in some counties, and in that sense this area is more resilient, there are likely to be higher levels of unemployment in the medium term – which, though chiefly dealt with by so-called natural wastage, will reduce the job-prospects for younger people. But there is good news in the sense that Bolton has been rated the 15th best town in Britain for business start-ups; and Manchester has increased its ranking among the best cities in Europe in which to do business – standing above Birmingham, Leeds, Edinburgh and Rome.

But we must not be beguiled into thinking there is no bad news on our patch. Every individual who, through no fault of their own, is weaker, poorer, increasingly unaided, requires our compassion and support. The Big Society may be a good idea, but it must

not become a camouflage; and, as I have indicated, nor must the churches, other faiths and voluntary societies (themselves hit by cuts) become a department of government.

In a characteristically perceptive piece about churches and faiths, the Chief Rabbi made an observation that is not far removed from one of our own Mission Goals in this diocese – about the importance of growing congregations in the current climate; and that takes further a point made by Polly Toynbee, writing from a very different starting point, in the Guardian. “The happiest people” she wrote, “join groups, volunteer, trust one another and share the values of sharing”. The Chief Rabbi, basing his remarks on reputable surveys, argued that: “Religiosity as measured by church or synagogue attendance turns out to be the best predictor of altruism and empathy: better than education, age, income, gender or race. These attributes (are) not related to people’s religious beliefs but to the frequency with which they attend a place of worship. Religion creates community, community creates altruism, and altruism turns us away from self and toward the common good. ...This research confirms what I see every week around our synagogues: networks of support often breathtaking in their strength and moral beauty. Here are people visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, helping individuals through personal crises, supporting those in financial need, assisting people who have lost their jobs, caring for the elderly, and proving daily that our troubles are halved and our joys doubled when they are shared with others. Religions build strong communities. We are going to need their social capital if we are to create a big society.

St Matthew’s gospel memorably defines the incarnational ministry to which every worshipping Christian congregation is called in the passage in chapter 25 where the Son of Man comes in his glory. “He will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left”. You know the story – it is about the measure of our compassion; and the vision to which we aspire is what He says, as it were, to the sheep: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him: “Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick and in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them: Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”.

Our calling as a church, in the communities we serve and the nation to which we belong, is to make sure that, by the appropriateness of our words and our actions, compassion is not cut from our society. For without compassion this land will be a mean, selfish and impoverished place. May God save us from that.

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