

St Matthew's Newcastle

# Faith and Culture

*Sermon for The Midnight Mass of the Nativity 2011*

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A little while ago, Mr Cameron delivered a speech as part of the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible. It was widely spun as a not-so-subtle criticism of what he considers to be the Archbishop of Canterbury's failure of moral leadership. Perhaps the Prime Minister does not fully appreciate that whilst he has about a hundred ministers to keep in line, the Archbishop has may be a hundred thousand around the world and generally lacks the capacity of Number Ten to slap down problems and embarrassments. Ironically and perhaps unawares, the Prime Minister's words neatly illustrated some of the problems that Archbishop Rowan faces in providing this moral leadership.

In the first place, he asserted that England is a Christian country; but he did not say what that means. It is certainly not a Christian country in the way it was a couple of generations ago. He might have been suggesting that it has a Christian heritage with some residual influences in our laws and customs.

If that is what he meant, then it dovetails with another section where he spoke of himself as a committed, but vaguely practising Church of England Christian. The notion of the non or vaguely practising Christian is not without its problems. However, Mr Cameron went on to say that he will stand up for the values and principles of his faith; but balanced this proclamation with the caveat that he is full of doubts and, like many, constantly grappling with the difficult questions when it comes to some of the big theological issues.

It is not my intention to lampoon or criticise the Prime Minister. I would be terrified to lay myself on the line like this and he must act according to the promptings of his conscience; he may well be a much better person than me or many who regularly resort to the parochial pews. However, his position does lay bare a huge challenge that the Christian religion faces in our present cultural context.

There is a popular tendency to create a conceptual notion of Christianity as a good thing and wholesome influence, whilst at the same time driving a wedge between its notional ethos and the foundations of that culture in doctrine and prayer.

Of course, you do not need to be vaguely practising to struggle with the difficult questions and theological issues - they are the daily fare of many regular participants in the life of the Church. However, the resolution of these difficult questions and theological issues must emerge from the community informed by its liturgical life and theological reflexion, rooted in the daily engagement with Christ in Word and Sacrament - for that, surely, is the *sine qua non* of designating something as Christian.

Where this regular contact with the roots of our Faith is wanting there lurks the danger that we will impute to our claimed Christian allegiance, views and actions, which owe their inspiration to other alien influences.

This is not to say that our theology has nothing to learn from these other perspectives, but their promptings must always be tested against the Gospel - not just in the discipline of rational thought, but also in the prayer, which can lift our minds above the limitations of wilfulness and the familiar.

The Birth of Christ, which we begin to celebrate tonight, represented just such a transcending of the status quo. It is undeniable, whether or not you accept the

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propositions of Faith about His Person, that His Life and Memory have altered the course that history would otherwise have taken - without the Birth of Jesus of Nazareth, nobody would have been arguing today - two thousand years on - whether England remains a Christian country.

However, His pre-eminence emanates not from the devotion of His followers, but from within His character and identity. In His Life, the divine and the human become One; and if this were not the case, then his authority would be no more than yours or mine. What people identify as the Christian agenda would actually be nothing more than a set of propositions with which we happened to agree.

This Incarnation - this “enfleshment” - of the Divine provides the model of Faith. God chose to give His Will and Purpose concrete expression in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, whose ethical pronouncements and critiques were issued in the context of religious practice and prayer.

Whilst, as Pope Benedict has observed, Christ’s Gospel has something of the philosophical about it, without embodiment in human lives and society, it remains mere potential seeking a home. To be fulfilled, it must be expressed in religious, ethical, political and economic enterprise; indeed, in every department of human endeavour.

It also needs to be incarnated in every cultural setting if its Truths are to be communicated effectively. The Church makes a mistake when she fails to distinguish between what theological technocrats term the Kerygma - the essence of the Gospel - and a particular cultural expression.

Not least, this is the case, because although the content of the Gospel is constant, it has different things to say in different situations and to different people. As it holds its mirror of Truth in front of the world, the rich will see a different reflexion from the poor, the tyrant from democrat, the Catholic from the Protestant.

Knitting together these strands of perception is a complex and time consuming challenge. In the first place, we look in the mirror insufficiently often and try to defend and protect inaccurate and wilful recollections of what we saw when last we did.

Moreover, our aspirations can be limited, separating bits of our context from the rest and seeking to find the answers in these abstractions of human life. It is usually much easier to find what we want when we ignore whole swathes of the multifarious reality, which is life on earth; but we do not necessarily want the Truth.

To those to whom it has been granted to see the great Light of Truth, as Saint Paul points out, we see it in a glass darkly and we understand only in part. Each of us sees but a point on the spectrum of Truth refracted through the prism of this world's variety. The challenge, if we wish to understand more, is to follow that ray back towards its source, slowly converging on that point with all the others who are on the same journey of faithful inquiry.

Closer to the source of all Truth, we can also begin to integrate our atomised moral insights: how our approach to slavery might inform our attitudes to economic captivity; how to reconcile the apparent tensions between the dignity of the individual and the needs of the corporate society, which sustains us all; the proper analysis of and response to advances in science and knowledge and whether can-do always implies may do.

This is a process that cannot be forced. One might through coercion impose outward conformity, but there is always the risk of enforcing error even if from the best of motivations. Achieving moral consensus, rather than an ethically motivated rule of law, must await the moment when particular values inhabit the generality of hearts and minds - until a particular precept is given concrete expression in human will and adherence.

Residual historical influences are not sufficient to achieve this, neither is an ethical

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code remote from the everyday experiences of the people. This much was clear at the turn of the century, which saw Jesus of Nazareth born into the world. For this reason, God confronted and challenged the people of Israel with a very real experience of His Will and Purpose in the incarnate Christ. It is in the encounter with His enduring Presence in the world that we can find the inspiration and motivation for the pursuit of righteousness.

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