

Sermon
Trinity 14 Ordinary Sunday 26

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All Saints, Blackheath

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As the financial crisis deepens and a Greek default on debt looks, according to today's reports, a near certainty, one thing seems to be agreed by all financial commentators. There is a lack of authority, no single power to make the crucial decisions that would be a circuit breaker in the current cycle of lack of confidence in our money markets.

But it's not surprising that our financial systems lack an appropriate authority to guard and guide them. There is a lack of authority in almost every area of life. The riots in our streets this summer show a lack of respect for authority. The crisis in the Anglican communion has its origins in lack of agreement about where authority lies. And there is an interesting link between this crisis in which some Anglicans claim to assert the literal meaning of Scripture as the ultimate authority. Scripture is absolutely clear that it is wrong to charge interest on a loan. The sin of usury on which our whole economic life is established is more deeply and more frequently condemned in the Bible than any sexual practice or remarriage after divorce.

Today's Gospel is all about authority: By whose authority does Jesus speak? Of course, Jesus' enemies are trying to catch him out, a trap he does not fall into. But they are right to ask the question.

One of the quotes I have been pondering on since this summer's riots comes from a paper written by the Anglo-American and Anglican poet T.S. Eliot in 1930. Eliot's writes this:

The World is trying to experiment with attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the World from suicide.

No society in human history has ever been established without a religious basis for ethical action, without the foundational authority given by religious faith. I believe this experiment that we are conducting can only lead to disaster. I see the effects on the lives of young people day after day. Young people who have to rediscover in their lives the lessons that humanity has surely learnt over millennia. The lessons that actions have consequences, that faithful loving lifelong relationships are the best context for sex, that concern for others and not just for self is what creates happiness and harmony in society.

Now, I know that it is easy to sound like some sort of Daily Mail reading fundamentalist but I think that the Gospel today gives us a clue as to where we should look for the true source of an authority that can give boundary to our lives and actions. That authority is in human conscience. Authority which lies outside of us whether in biblical text or in frightening power figures will never save us.

Jesus refuses to say that his authority comes either from heaven or earth, his authority lies in himself. In the story he tells of the two sons Jesus shows us the role of conscience and the effect that it has on individuals, one son has a well developed conscience which informs him that after his initial response to his father that he has done wrong, that he needs to change his actions. The other son has a conscience that allows him both to lie to his father and not to pursue the action that he ought.

Now conscience is not the same as the kind of individual choice that is the true god of our society. Neither is conscience the same as 'reason' or intellectual thought which is often held up as one of the threefold cords of Anglican thought: Scripture, Tradition and Reason. And nor is conscience some modern invention. Conscience is for the scholastic tradition of western theology, for Aquinas himself, the bedrock in the lives of human beings which makes moral, ethical action possible.

For the scholastics conscience is the shape within us, formed by our being created, as Genesis makes clear, in the image and likeness of God. Conscience is the recognition that our lives need to fit that image and that when they don't there is profound discomfort and unhappiness. Imagine wearing a pair of shoes not fitting properly, that causes blisters and make walking difficult. That is what the effect of conscience is like.

Conscience is incipient in every human being, but it also needs to be formed, educated and developed like every other aspect of human life. Psalm 139 is for me the great psalm of conscience. If you don't know it try reading it as part of your daily prayer this week:

*O Lord thou hast searched me out and known me,
thou knowest my down sitting and mine up-rising, ...
for my reins are thine,
thou hast covered me in my mother's womb.*

The source of the ills of our society and world is atheism, those who directly reject the existence of God and we ourselves when we live as if God did not exist, the refusal to acknowledge that God exists and that we are created to be like him, but even more that we do not search for God like we search for fame or fortune because, as Jesus said 'the Kingdom of God is within you' (Lk 17:21). St John of the Cross put this very simply 'The soul's centre is God' he says.

Let me quote a section from Fr Martin Laird's recent book:

This Centre, he writes, 'is not an object like other centres in the middle of something else...As St Bonaventure puts it, 'God is an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.' To glimpse this, however fleetingly, is to realise that we are and always have been immersed in unfathomable Vastness that is at the same time as familiar and unremarkable as a bar of soap. This is our home.'

Conscience is not guilt, it is not shame, conscience is rational, calm and universal. It is not an emotion or a feeling. It is easily smothered by both these things. Conscience can only be formed and acknowledged as we acknowledge the existence and reality of God.

And this is embedded in our very language: if we are seeking an authority to avoid the Suicide of which T.S. Eliot warned, the etymology of the word authority is the same as the word for author. The One who has written the world, the author, the source of all being is

the only, the true authority. That is why Jesus could not answer the question, he speaks by no one's authority than his own because he is the author, the creator, he could say so truly what each of us could say if our lives were immersed in the vastness of God's presence, what the writer Angelus Silesius so beautifully says:

God far more dwells in me than if the entire sea
Would in a tiny sponge wholly contained be.

This week pray psalm 139, sink into the presence of God who is already deep within you and give thanks:

*I will give thanks to thee for I am fearfully and wonderfully made:
marvellous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well.*