The Church and the Good Society

9 June 2019 *Pentecost*
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Luke 4: 16–22 Acts 2: 37–end

> ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach
> the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted,
> to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
> to let the oppressed go free, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.’

I have two texts this evening – or more accurately a text and an anti-text. The text is Jesus’s words reading from Isaiah. The second is provided by my history teacher – who many years ago would regularly intone the adage: ‘he who generalises, generally lies’. That’s the anti-text, just in the sense that in order to address my theme – the church and the good society – I’m going have to do something I don’t usually do, which that adage warns against, which is to venture a big picture about the state we are in. I am generally suspicious of big pictures and sweeping narratives and dramatic stories – perhaps because I can still hear my history teacher intoning his warning – but I can’t speak about the church, its ministry and mission in our day, without speaking about the times we live in, and talking about them in very broad brush strokes. So here goes with a big story about our times.

Now my story begins with Nietzsche, one of Christianity’s most profound critics. Nietzsche, at one and the same time, both despised Christianity and feared it. He regarded it as both contemptible, and yet dangerous. Why? Well he despised it because it was a religion of compassion. Christ taught that true humanity was found in care for the poor, the sick, the outcast and the down trodden. In our lesson from Luke’s Gospel, in the very first public words of his public ministry, Jesus identifies himself as the one who will fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah, the one who will preach the gospel to the poor, bring healing to the broken hearted, deliverance to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. But for Nietzsche, true human greatness was not found in such a mission, but in rising above poverty, suffering and bondage. Magnificence was to be found in striving for and exercising power, and not in exercising it on behalf of the weak, but over them. For Christ glory lay in fellowship and solidarity with suffering human kind, for Nietzsche it lay in mastery and domination.

But if Nietzsche despised Christianity, he also feared it. As Nietzsche saw it, Christianity was not the weak and feeble thing that some 19th-century thinkers supposed it to be, and as many would think in the 20th century. They supposed it be weak and feeble on account of the alleged failure of various apologetic strategies in defence of Christianity. And Nietzsche likewise thought that those strategies, whether philosophical or historical, failed. But he knew better that simply to discount Christianity – he knew that Christianity’s power lay in its

moral vision, not in its accomplishments in philosophical gymnastics or historical apologetics. So notwithstanding his contempt for Christianity, he didn't doubt the bewitching strength of its ethical appeal.

And on this point – on the abiding power of Christianity – he was of course right, since we could say, as many commentators have said, that the last 100 years have seen the silent and surreptitious triumph of practical Christianity, whatever one thinks about Christianity's success or otherwise in intellectual skirmishes. In different ways, the 20th century saw the triumph of a form of humanitarianism with deep, deep roots in Christian life and thought.

Let me cite two bits of evidence for the surreptitious triumph of Christianity, one national and the other international – and both from the same period, just at the end of the Second World War.

At the national level, what was the ambition of the Beveridge Report – to abolish the five curses of want, squalor, disease, idleness and ignorance, to provide welfare for all from cradle to grave – if it was not to express the humanitarianism of the Christian Gospel? – or as the then Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, put it, the Beveridge Report was 'the first time anyone had set out to embody the whole spirit of the Christian ethic in an Act of Parliament'. Now doubtless the subsequent translation of the vision of the Report through the introduction of the National Health Service, old age pensions, sickness benefit and so on, was in certain respects flawed – but the point remains, that the mid-century commitment to a welfare state was an attempt to express the very ethic which Nietzsche despised.

Internationally, at almost the very same time, Churchill and Roosevelt signed in 1941 the so called Atlantic Charter, from which sprang the influential institutions of the post-war world (the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF and so on), institutions which sought to realize a vision of international interdependence, cooperation, and justice. The outworking of that vision also gave us the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, which together endeavoured to ensure rights and protection for people displaced by the traumas of war and persecution. Again, all this was doubtless imperfect and flawed; but Churchill was surely right when he said of the Atlantic Charter that it was 'not a law, but a star' – and a star which burnt with a light the immediate source of which was Christianity.

So – Nietzsche's fear proved grounded. Although, as he saw it, Christianity had not won the intellectual war of the 18th or 19th century, nonetheless it won the peace. It was the inspiration for the establishment of a national and even international order which, whatever its failings, sought to make compassion the basis of society.

But – and you surely heard a 'but' coming – come back Nietzsche, your time is now. For call me a pessimist if you will, but it seems to me that if one takes a cool and careful look at the national and international scene towards the end of the first twenty years of this century, one may conclude as follows: that if in important respects the shaping of the social order in the twentieth century belonged to Christianity, the reshaping of this order in the twenty first century does not. Again, I paint with broad brush strokes, but let me just touch on three areas which to my mind speak of the eclipse of that star of which Churchill spoke.

1. Migrants. I will not reprise Andrew's powerful sermon on the theme from two weeks ago, but let me mention a story from this week's newspapers, of a recent submission to the International Criminal Court, by two reputable and distinguished international lawyers, which charges the EU and its member states with crimes against humanity for Europe's post-2014 policy in relation to migrants. Prior to 2014, the search and rescue policy known as Mare Nostrum aimed at saving migrants at sea, allowing them to disembark in safe havens

where their claims to refugee status could be assessed. By 2015 the policy had changed – Europe abandoned rescue at sea (indeed NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières were effectively prohibited from running rescue missions), and migrants were forcibly returned, typically to Libya, where they are housed in camps in which, to quote, 'atrocious crimes are committed' against them.

A policy which was once humanitarian, has now become one of prevention through deterrence – a policy to the success of which, in other words, death at sea and mistreatment on land, are instrumental. In place of a policy of compassion and humanitarianism, the policy in relation to Europe's southern border, now the most dangerous border in the world, is to leave people to their fate.

Of course, putting any moral questions aside for a moment, there is a simple fallacy underlying the policy of prevention through deterrence in relation to migrants – if people were leaving north Africa on a whim, so to speak, rendering their journeys more dangerous may indeed serve to deter them. But the migrants we are speaking of are prepared to commit themselves and their children to overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels, often with inadequate protection against the elements, let alone life vests in case of emergency – so a policy which aims to reduce their chances of survival and punish them if they are caught is not only callous and inhumane, but likely to be ineffective as a deterrent. From a moral point of view, the Holy Father Pope Francis has put it pithily – as the migrants lose their lives, Europe loses its souls.

2. That reflection on the folly of prevention through deterrence leads naturally enough to my second exhibit, again just to touch on, and that is prisons. The last thirty five years or so has seen a harshening of prison regimes in this country – populist politics has favoured longer and tougher sentences. And yet just as migration is a desperate response to desperate circumstances, so too crime is often so very strongly associated with social disadvantage and deprivation, that we may say of many young criminals that they are doing little more than living out the criminal destinies which have been thrust upon them.

Let me give you just one set of figures which reveal something of what I think we should all find deeply troubling. A child in care in this country is 15 times more likely to be criminalized in any one year than one their peers not in care. And of those who do offend while in care, fully 84% 'have been taken into care because of acute family stress, family dysfunction, parental illness/disability or absence' (70%)[1] or 'primarily because of abuse or neglect' (14%).

There is a lot more to be said about crime and social deprivation, but those simple figures alone surely tell us that we need to reckon with the fact that we have created a society in which individuals receive as a woeful birth rite, a criminal destiny. Of course, the story of any criminality can probably be told as a story in which individuals take individual decisions which bring them face to face with the courts; but those stories are themselves part of larger histories in which individuals, in dire circumstances, learn patterns of perception, judgment, and behaviour which direct them towards criminality. This is not to deny choice – but it is to say that sin sometimes lies in situations behind an action, more than actually in it, and behind it in the social and familial circumstances in which certain individuals are pushed towards criminal careers.

Our prison system, which has become more and more punitive over the last 30 years, is blind to the social inequities and deprivations which have produced criminal destinies – it has piled on the deterrence, ineffective though it is, while ignoring the troubled social worlds which inequality and deprivation have created and from which criminals typically come.

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[1] Howard League for Penal Reform, *Ending the Criminalisation of Children in Residential Care: Briefing One* (2017), unnumbered pages.

3. My third site of the decay of humanitarianism is old age. In the last fifty years our society has been acutely challenged by the aging of the population. In principle one would think the fact that we are living longer would be simply good news – fewer of us are dying of the causes which killed our grandparents or great grandparents (heart attacks, sepsis, kidney failure, pneumonia and the like), and so we are living into much older old age than they did. If we go back to 1945, when the Old Age Pension as we know it was introduced, to be paid to men at 65 years old, life expectancy for a male was 64. Now that figure is more than 80.

But we have found no way, it seems, to provide for an extended old age in which there is a decent level of comfort and social engagement for all, let alone joy, or exuberance. 150 years ago the frail elderly dreaded the workhouse – now we all dread the care home, for we all know very well that the one thing it will probably not feel like is home. But even short of being sequestered in a care home, loneliness, poverty and broken-heartedness is too often the norm for our elderly – one of the saddest signs of which to me, is the number of elderly people who eat alone, day by day.

I have taken as my theme for tonight, the church and the good society and I start from the fact that as any Christian should see it, the good society would not look like this. When our Lord declared in the synagogue in Nazareth that he was the one anointed to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed – he spoke on behalf of that humanitarian vision which Nietzsche so despised, that humanitarian vision which if it had its heyday in the mid-point of the last century, is now severely under attack.

So my question is – what does this mean for the church? How can the church be the sign and servant of its Lord in this time?

I think one has to say that the church of this century must, must be more than the church of the last century. There is always a danger, is there not, especially when what Nietzsche feared was coming true – when practical Christianity was making its way in the world – there is always a danger that the church will become ornamental, a place for something called spirituality, which may amount to little more than some pleasant reflections and singing of hymns before other gentle Sunday activities – such as visiting a house owned by the National Trust and having a cream tea. The church has always been more than that – it has never so entirely lost its way that it has forgotten its mission to those to whom and for whom our Lord came, those in bondage and oppressed, the broken-hearted and the poor. But in such times as ours, the church surely must be more than it has been.

How can it be more – and in what way? The vision I have – although perhaps vision is too strong a word – the inkling I have, is that the church, no longer relying on the increasing reach of humanitarianism as it might have done in mid last century, must itself boldly occupy the space which has been vacated. It can no longer be a site chiefly of moral reflection and exhortation let alone of spiritual musings, but must become a site of moral endeavour and action. It must be a place where refugees and migrants find the welcome they are denied at the border; a place where prisoners experience the forgiveness and acceptance and grounds for hope, which our increasingly brutal prison regime denies them; it must be a place where the elderly find commensality – to use a posh word for eating together – real and actual table fellowship, which in their increasingly isolated and lonely existence, is all too rare.

But how is this to be? I think it can only be if churches themselves cease to be the somewhat ephemeral or virtual communities they have sometimes become – sometimes existing for little more than an hour or two on a Sunday morning. If the church is not only to imagine an alternative society, but to contribute to recovery of the humanitarian society which is in danger of being lost, then it must be itself a more real and substantial presence in the world.

Now it is a fact, I think, that some of the most telling and dramatic contributions which have been made to the creation and recreation of civility by the church in the last 2,000 years, have come from real and substantial monastic communities – from the Benedictines in the 9th and 10th centuries and from the friars in the 13th. Perhaps our own churches, if they are to be counters to the forces of incivility, will need to be founded on new commitments to communal life. Monastic vows have traditionally been life long – but is it possible to imagine that new communities could respond to our new circumstances by allowing a temporary vocation, allowing for more fluid, yet real communities – in which people lived, especially young people, for three, four or five years, creating the very communities which would allow the church to be more, to embody a communal life into which the oppressed and broken-hearted could be received?

I dare to speak of such a vision on the day of Pentecost, since Pentecost invites us to turn to, and trust in, the third great miracle on which the life of the church is founded. The first great miracle on which the Christian life depends is the miracle of the incarnation – when Christ became man and lived a human life with us and for us. The second great miracle is that of Easter, when the life of Christ is vindicated by the resurrection and is triumphant over evil and death. But Pentecost is the third great miracle of the Christian faith, when this life, the life of Christ, victorious over death, takes form amongst us in human life through the power of God's spirit. And we heard in our second lesson what this taking form means in the response of those who heard Peter preach on the very first Pentecost: 'and all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their goods and gave to the poor as any had need, sharing their meals with unaffected joy'.

Today is a day for dreaming dreams – the story of Pentecost requires us to dream dreams of new forms of human life, to look beyond the world as it is, to how it might be. So this is a good story to send with all of you who are leaving Trinity this month – a story about the power of God's healing spirit to bring new and better life to a world not guided by dreams so much as beset, so it can sometimes seem, by nightmares.

The newspapers often speak of the crisis of old age, the crisis of migration – even perhaps the crisis of prisons. But as I see it any such crisis is first of all a crisis for the life of the church and for those of us who make up the church – will it or will it not be the church of Jesus Christ, the one who was anointed by God's spirit to preach good news to the poor? Let us pray for ourselves and each other that the power of God's spirit may open our hearts and minds and touch our lives, each and every one, that we and the Church, may be servants of this Lord.