

Sermon: The City New Year Service 11th January 2008

This is the tenth City Service for which it has been my job to find someone to give the Address. We have had many intelligent and distinguished preachers over the years. Well, you can see I've put a stop to that this morning. In my first year, Ann Widdecombe helped me out of a hole at very short notice. Trouble was she turned up twenty-five minutes late and left me, the new boy, having kittens. The next year was worse. Freddie Forsyth went to the wrong church and didn't arrive until half past twelve.

St Michael's is good for the careers of those who speak at this service. Archbishop Cormac Murphy O'Connor came one year and was immediately afterwards promoted to Cardinal. Michael Howard came and a few weeks later he was made Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition. I can't say I'm expecting the word from Lambeth this morning. Once Roger Scruton came and told us how very important religious observance is – and some seemed to hear echoes of Voltaire, *for the servants*. Peter Hitchens preached a most moving defence of the Prayer Book and the Recorder, Michael Hyam, now alas departed this life, spoke about the sacred character of the law.

Over the last ten years in the City I have heard some pretty odd things said about the Christian faith. I have heard Right Wing people say that they don't go along with the miracles and the resurrection and all that stuff, but that religion is good as a basis for morality. This seems to miss the point that to base your morality on a lie doesn't seem to be a good place to start.

I have heard people on the Left talk about the faith as if it's a metaphor for social involvement. These people don't believe in miracles either. You must have heard this sort of thing from dozens of hairy Leftie clergymen: *The feeding of the 5000 was to teach us to share... if we all take just a little, there'll be enough to go round*. Well, if Jesus had said something as soppy and clichéd as that, why should the Gospel writers bother to record it? Besides, they didn't each take just a little. The Gospel says they were filled and twelve baskets were gathered up of the fragments.

I heard more of this social welfare tosh in sermons last Christmas. One bishop on television spoke about the wonder of Christ being born of a poor family in a cowshed – as if it had been less of a comedown for God if he had chosen to be incarnated as Master of the Worshipful Company of the Makers of Knicker Elastic, or Mayor of Southend

Still others regard the Christian Faith as a basis for art and culture: all those Italian paintings and the Gothic cathedrals. Gosh, if it hadn't been for that Jesus chappie, we might never have had Johann Sebastian Bach – or even John Rutter! But the trouble with most modern commentators on Christian art is that they talk about it from the point of view of secular humanist aesthetics: some gleefully; remember Kenneth Clark? But you cannot talk about Christianity in this way and be true to it. That would be like those ponderous pieces we sometimes get in *The Guardian* which discuss football from the perspective of the Marxist dialectic

The Archbishop of Canterbury – bless him! – told us at Christmas there were no kings at the stable, there weren't three of them and we don't know their names. No

shepherds either. And if you don't believe the Virgin Birth, that's not a handicap. Why does he seem to think that the only criteria for truth are those of 19th century German biblical criticism? No kings? No shepherds? How do we know there is an Archbishop of Canterbury and not just some wraith-like political druid on his way to another synod debate on the pagan fantasy of global warming?

How do we distinguish between the story of Christ and the story of Santa Claus. Dr Williams' answer was interesting. He said, *Belief in Santa does not generate a moral code, it does not generate art, it does not generate imagination.* So here we're back among the social workers and the culture vultures: Christianity is seen as useful for *something else*, something other than itself.

But the Christian Faith is not an agreeable colour scheme for sectional interests of any hue. And the only reason for believing the Christian faith is because it's true. Most of its contemporary despisers know no theology or philosophy. Richard Dawkins is particularly vacuous: it's as if I should try to tell him that the whole of biology is contained in the book *Janet and John Look at Frogs*.

Christianity is morally profound and intellectually vigorous. It was Christianity in the doctrine of The Trinity which corrected the metaphysical error which doomed classical civilisation. In the so-called Dark Ages, Christians invented the university and began to make possible modern science. Nothing has happened since that time to make our faith any the less believable. The problem is that our society seems to think we can give up Christianity, yet all the civilising and cultural benefits of the faith will remain: they will not. As Eliot said as long ago as 1934:

*Do you need to be told that even such modest attainments
As you can boast in the way of polite society
Will hardly survive the faith to which they owe their significance?*

Indeed, already our defection from the faith is revealing an encroaching barbarism in our streets and in our public and personal morality. And everywhere Christianity is under attack, whether it's the new sexual orientation rules which undermine marriage; the abolition of Sunday; or the widespread opposition to Christian symbolism. The BBC broadcast the blasphemous *Jerry Springer: The Opera* which contains countless examples of the Lord's name taken in vain; and has the character of Our Lord incontinent and in nappies. But I'll bet the BBC won't follow up this remarkable smash hit with *Mohammed: The Teddy Bear Years*. Did you know that it is now actually illegal to teach in state schools that the Christian Faith is true? One can only teach *about* the various religions. And of course the only perspective from which one can do this is secular. Tax-funded atheism.

We want to stop the rot? Then we must return to God. This is not some laborious or painful thing to do. I remember about five years ago a liveryman stood at that lectern to read *Genesis 3* – the story of Adam's disobedience. And by hell he gave it some wellie! *And God said, Who TOLD thee that thou wast naked?* Behind that stentorian outburst, the red face and the quivering lip, there must have lurked in the poor man's mind the terrible recollection of some brutish housemaster.

But our God is not like this. God wills only what is good for us. In fact *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* Let us go then, you and I, let us return to him whose love can assuage all our fears. Let us return to the one who promised, *Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you...Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*