

Rights or Rites – in the Church?

Mark 1 vv 9-15

‘The time is fulfilled the Kingdom of God has come near’ Mark 1
v 15

It will not have escaped your attention that the Bishops of the Church of England have issued a collective letter – a Pastoral Letter ‘Who is my neighbour? A letter from the House of Bishops to the people and Parishes of the Church of England for the General Election 2015’

I doubt whether many of you have read the full 52 page epistle but predictably the politicians and the press claim to have and comments have included ‘disengenuous, nakedly partisan, and naïve.’

It is true that the Church is resurfacing as an ebullient political lobby. Since the appointment of Justin Welby as Archbishop of Canterbury there has been a campaign against pay-day lending, a warning over food banks, and notably a book of essays edited by the Archbishop of York, that apparently decried everything from advertising to inequality.

This of course stands in a modern tradition of the Church and State that can be traced back to William Temple’s ‘Christianity and Social Order’ published during the Second World War in

1942 looking ahead even then to the post war settlement. Again when Robert Runcie was Archbishop in 1983 we had the 'Church and the Bomb' which was suggestive of unilateral disarmament and famously under Robert Runcie once more 'Faith in the City' which was seen to have challenged Thatcherism's effect on the inner cities.

The response to most of these has been fairly uniform putting politicians into 'slightly alarmed' mode because at the end of the day practising Anglicans in the United Kingdom are in excess of one million, not to say all the nominal ones who might be influenced by their theoretical church leaders. Of course as Bishop Henry Henson of Durham once remarked when in an early ecumenical gathering in response to a Roman Catholic statement that would instruct all Catholics to respond accordingly. 'I can assure you that should the Archbishop of Canterbury (if he happens to be in the country at the time) issue any kind of instruction to priests and people it will be explicitly ignored!' Henson who was bishop of Durham from 1920 – 1939 is actually a good example of the conundrum type approach of the Church of England and its Rites and Rights. An Anglo-Catholic who was reviled by fellow high churchmen for his liberal views, a bishop who opposed strikes yet one who stood up for the rights of the workers and against the growing fascism of his time, he was often asked by what authority do you say these things? Which is exactly the question with which various newspaper leaders and politicians have denounced the latest

heavily nuanced call to people to exercise their democratic rights thoughtfully and little more.

So as we consider the Rights and Rites of the Church we need to ask ourselves whether the Church's role is simply to soothe troubled souls or to be more interventist even to the point of becoming unpopular and in context how does it affect us the faithful in West London?

It is impossible in attempting to answer such a question to avoid the long and complicated history of in particular the Church of England for it is within that slightly narrow denominational context that I confine myself, lest this Lenten sermon turn into a University lecture series.

It seems to me that there are three issues here. Two are historical legacy and practical and the last is inspirational and theological.

First, because of the nature of the Church of England and in particular its 16th century history we are inevitably bound into what is known as the Establishment. The Church of England is the *established* church, meaning, amongst other things:

- the Monarch is the Supreme Governor of the church
(theologically Jesus is the head),
- the Church performs a number of official functions,
- Church and State are linked

This is exemplified by the presence of 24 bishops in the House

of Lords, a phenomenon in terms of political governance that has no other contemporary parallel except in today's Iran under the Ayatollahs.

The Bishops incidentally sit on the so-called cross benches not identifying themselves with any party despite the fact that the C of E has been variously called the Conservative Party at prayer or as Robert Runcie used to say 'The Social Democratic Party at Prayer' – it also been said pejoratively that the C of E is a Church of Telegraph and Daily Mail readers ministered to by a clergy Guardian readers. Nevertheless, in the spirit of the aforementioned Bishop Henley Henson I am not at all sure that in either case the House of Bishops Pastoral Letter can guarantee to deliver the votes one way or the other!

Secondly, the Church of England despite all its problems has an unrivalled network of parishes, clergy and congregations in the communities of the land from the villages of the Yorkshire Dales to the little India of Southall. In this sense it is uniquely placed to speak authoritatively on social matters, on housing, on welfare, and on all the hot issues of the day.

Thirdly, there is the theological imperative that dates back to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ himself. Although it is clear that Jesus left absolutely no instructions that his followers should found a Church in his name with all its concomitant and attendant dross of structure, implacable hierarchy and intransigent opinion and so on. 'Jesus wept' is the shortest verse

in the English Bible (John 11 v 35 on the death of his friend Lazarus) and no doubt he weeps now over the things that are done in his name.

However, he did come in precisely the tradition of the Old Testament prophets who were looking forward to the coming of a Messiah who would be recognised in the words of Isaiah 61 v 1

‘The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.’

Jesus would also be in the tradition of our OT reading this morning with God’s promise of a new covenant exemplified by the rainbow in the sky, which was to signify a new relationship with creation.

If these latter points are true and they are foundational to our Faith then we have a strong reminder that as ‘those who are created in the image of a God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son for our sakes’ if I might for shorthand conflate two text one from Genesis and one from John, we are in the world and of the world. There is an inevitable concern for the wellbeing of individuals and for society at large and that is so whether Christians believe that it can best be achieved from the right or the left of the political spectrum

So finally there is a tension for Christian individually and collectively as the Church of being citizens of this world and subjects of the world to come. Two kingdoms as Martin Luther the great 16th century reformer put it basing himself on the writings of St Paul.

This is a recipe then not for a stepping-back into a kind of pietistic detachment but for a whole-hearted engagement with the world in which we live move and have our being. In this sense the Bishops are not only right to engage and challenge with their Pastoral Letter but are even obliged to do so – as are we too because ‘The time is fulfilled the Kingdom of God has come near’ and its coming cannot be delayed.