

Sermon by Bp Richard Harries June 20th 2010

On being serious

Not long now and we will be hearing the highly intelligent and perceptive commentary of John McEnroe at Wimbledon. Many of us of course remember him as a young super brat, with his famous and often repeated outburst at linesmen “You can’t be serious.”

The English are, I suspect, rather ambivalent about seriousness. We prefer a good laugh, and will often avoid conversations that get too serious. All this was rather well brought out in a play which my wife and I saw at the National this week, After the Dance, by Terence Rattigan. It has an interesting history. First performed in 1938, to ecstatic reviews, it only had a short run because of the war, and then when Rattigan fell out of fashion after the war with the rise of kitchen sink drama, dropped out of sight altogether. This was its first performance since 1938.

It is a play about the generation that reached adulthood after the carnage of World War I, a generation which had lost all its traditional moorings. Their life was nothing but drink, drugs, jazz, sex, and wild parties, above all, parties. This generation is now getting older, and everyone knows that Europe is in a state of crisis, with another terrible war highly likely, but the talk is still of the great parties of the past. Into this milieu of fun, fun, fun, where the only sin is to be boring, come some younger people, who see the world rather differently. For me, the play was about people becoming serious, about whether we can become serious, and what we are serious about. And one of the reasons the play holds the interest is that the way the characters respond to the crisis of the times and the crises in their own personal lives, is not predictable. They develop in surprising and unexpected ways.

The American theologian Paul Tillich had a fine phrase, which for him summed up what religion was about. It was “Ultimate concern.” From a human point of view this phrase poses the question of what is most important to us, what we are most serious about, of what, when the chips are down, we are ultimately concerned about. It is of course a question whose answer is revealed more in what we do than in what we say.

It helps, I think, to remind ourselves that true seriousness is very different from ponderousness, with being heavy, with being portentous, with, yes, being boring. Sometimes it is the funniest writers, the satirists, the bitter cartoonists, who are in fact the most serious about life. In some, of course, it may be that their humour is simply an unwillingness to face up to life as it is. But sometimes it is because they are truly serious they can laugh and make others laugh. The Christian essayist, and novelist Charles Williams was once asked what it meant to him to live the Christian life and he replied “Love, laugh, pray and be intelligent.” This answer is arresting in itself, but it takes on a particular authority from the fact that a number of people, including T.S.Eliot, thought that Charles Williams was the most transparently good person they had ever met. “Love, laugh, pray and be intelligent.” It was only possible for him to make that answer because at the heart of his life was a profound seriousness.

What Jesus took most seriously was the establishment of God’s gracious purpose in human affairs, what he called the Kingdom of God. You probably found today’s Gospel strange. So it is according the way we think now. But the world into which Jesus was born was one which believed that evil spirits could take hold of people. We know for certain that one of the things he did was to expel these spirits. When he was accused of being able to do so because he was in league with the devil in a very clever and pointed reply he showed that on the contrary, it was because he was an agent of God. And he added “If I by the finger of God cast

out devils, then be sure that the Kingdom of God has come amongst you.” Casting out devils, healing the sick and preaching good news to the poor were for him, and the first Christians, powerful signs that the rule of God in human affairs was indeed breaking into the world in and through Jesus. And for this Divine milieu he did, literally, give his life.

Today’s epistle was from St Paul’s letter to the Galatians, in which the apostle gives a full account of himself and what he stands for in the face of his critics. As we know, Paul met the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus and entered into the Kingdom that Jesus had proclaimed. Thereafter he was convinced that all that was necessary for a right relationship to God was a simple trust in Christ, in whom God reaches out to us and holds us close to himself. It is not first place about doing this and doing that, but letting God hold us and work through us. For this message Paul gave his life ceaselessly, travelling all over the Mediterranean world, enduring terrible hardships and misunderstandings. He wanted to bring together a new humanity united in this new reality. As the Epistle puts it

It is through faith that you are all sons of God in union with Christ Jesus... There is no such thing as Jew or Greek, slave and freeman, male and female, for you are all one person in Christ Jesus.
(Galatians 3, 26-8)

If you read the letters of Paul, you will find him sometimes difficult, sometimes exasperating, but what comes across above everything else, is that he cared. He cared about the Gospel. He cared about the tiny, flawed communities of Christian believers, that they grow in Christ. He was deeply, deeply serious. And to this he too gave his life.

We live in serious times. Most obviously of course there is the financial crisis and the general instability of capitalism. On the

longer term there is the effect of our way of life on the environment, of which the BP spillage is just the latest and most dramatic example. This week it was reported that Uzbeks are literally being slaughtered in their thousands by the majority Kyrgyz population-just the latest example of the kind of anarchy and savagery that is always just below the surface of so called civilised life. And all the time the gap between rich and poor, both in this country and the world, continues to widen, even in the last year.

This is no call to be puffed. “Love, laugh, pray and be intelligent” as Charles Williams said. But it does pose again the question of what at the heart of it all we are serious about-a question whose answer is revealed less in what we say than in what we do. And Jesus of course was quite clear. He said “Set your mind on God’s kingdom and his justice before everything else.”