

Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries on 11th October 2020

Trinity 18

St Mary's, Barnes

Philippians 4, 1-9; Matthew 22, 1-14

“I miss civilisation, I want it back”. This remark of the novelist Marilynne Robinson was the starting point for a discussion with Rowan Williams on a recent Start the Week. “I miss civilisation, I want it back.” Not everyone has thought of civilisation in so positive terms. Gandhi was once asked “What do you think of Western civilisation?” to which he replied, “I think it would be a good idea.” Roman civilisation which has shaped Europe so decisively did not appear benign to the 1 million Gaul’s who were slaughtered by the armies of Julius Caesar. British civilisation did not appear a force for good to the millions of slaves who perished or to the victims of its numerous atrocities. So, we need to be careful in our lament for a lost civilisation. But Marilynne Robinson meant something quite specific. Democracy, she argued, depended on an ethic of restraint. An ethic of restraint. Test the first presidential debate against that phrase. Test the mutual slagging off of so much politics against that norm. Test all the reported abuse on social media, and the unreported abuse, against it. Clearly something has been lost. When or how I am not sure. Marilynne Robinson argued that an ethic of restraint, so essential to democracy, depended on a fundamental respect for conscience, and this, she continued, depended in the end on a Christian view of what is to be a human being, a view of course on which western civilisation, for all its flaws, and social democracy, for all its weaknesses, has been built. There is plenty of religion around in America, she said, but it is not the real thing. The real thing reinforces a respectful, generous and hopeful attitude to other people. That is sadly missing in our public life at the moment.

I don't think this means being sentimental or uncritical about others. Often, we need to be highly critical, but it does mean reminding ourselves that however vile their behaviour, however grotesquely distorted their soul might be, it is still held in the hands of God.

Conventions, codes of civility, by which an ethic of restraint is expressed and upheld, change all the time-and those of the past were of course hierarchical and male-dominated in a way we now find unacceptable. It is not taken for granted now that it is the man who should open the door for a woman or that he should pay for a dinner together. They change their form, but in one form or another civilisation depends on such codes of civility not least in public life. So, it is in the Commons the speaker can still tell a member to leave the chamber for unparliamentary behaviour.

The other evening, I had a fascinating discussion with two of my grandsons in their twenties and learnt that there is now an accepted convention when you ask someone to be a girl or boyfriend. When you ask this, it implies that you will not be going out with anyone else in the same way and that you are wanting to develop the relationship further. I don't remember anything as formal as that being around in my day. So what interests me is what new codes of civility might the new generation be generating with regard both to relationships and the use of social media? If you are in contact with young people, I would be interested to know what you learn from them.

Civilisation, as I say, depends on certain conventions, not least conventions of public restraint and codes of civility. But undergirding them will be a set of moral values, and these in the West have been rooted in a Christian vision of what it is to be a human being, made in the image of God, fallen away from that image, restored in that image and called to grow into the divine likeness.

Whether the secular West can retain the set of moral values without the Christian vision remains to be seen.

That set of moral values is most brilliantly stated in John Henry Newman's long definition of a gentleman, in his classic book The Idea of a University. There we read for example

If he engages in controversy of any kind, his disciplined intellect preserves him from the blundering discourtesy of better, perhaps, but less educated minds; who, like blunt weapons, tear and hack instead of cutting clean

However, we need look no further than today's sublime epistle from Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians for an even more powerful exposition part of which reads.

⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone

⁸ Finally, beloved,^[e] whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about^[f] these things.

One particular phrase in that passage has given modern translators some difficulty. In the version I have just read it was "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." Other versions read "Let your magnanimity be known to all" and in the Revised English Bible, perhaps best of all "Be known to everyone for your consideration to others." A trusted scholar says about it

It is that considerate courtesy and respect for the integrity of others which prompts a person not to be for ever standing on their rights ; and it is pre-eminently the character of Jesus.

A good guide to controversy as to everything else and perhaps I should end there.

However, you will rightly have found today's Gospel so puzzling a quick word about that is necessary. The first part is clear enough. Jesus found that his message was rejected by the political and religious establishment, so he went out of his way to include those whom they excluded. To explain this, he told today's parable about

invitations being sent out to a great party even to those living on the streets. This message made sense in the context of the ministry of Jesus and it made even more sense to the early church when gentiles started being converted and joining the wedding party. The odd twist comes at the end-those who had come in off the streets were kicked out because they were not wearing wedding togs. How could they? They were living rough. Totally unfair. So it is likely that this twist was not part of the original parable but came from another context and was placed here by the early church to stress the need for faith-the garment which must be worn at the wedding banquet given by God being faith in Christ. But what I like is the interpretation given to this by the novelist and poet Charles Williams.

Charles Williams was the third member of the trio that make up the inklings, the other two being Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, and by all account he was a truly saintly man.

He wrote a poem about the wedding garment in which he imagines heaven as a great ball-everyone is wearing wonderful clothes-but those clothes are the qualities which we are prepared to see in other people, even though they may be different from our own

He saw along

He Great Hall and the Heavenly Stair

One blaze of glorious changes there.

Cloaks, brooches, decorations, swords,

Jewels-every virtue that affords

(by dispensation of the Throne)

Beauty to wearers not their own.

This guest his brother's courage wore

That his wife's zeal. While, just before
She in his steady patience shone.

Magnificence

A father borrowed of his son,
Who was not there ashamed to don
His father's wise economy.
No, he or she was he or she
Merely.

So coming back to today's epistle, perhaps that is the place to start-opening our eyes to the qualities of those around us, even though they may be very different from our own, and then opening our eyes even wider even to see something in the people and politicians we most despise. Very difficult at the moment-and it does not as I say means being blind, sentimental or uncritical, but it does mean reminding ourselves that every human soul is held in the hand of God; every human soul is precious. It is on this vision that the best of Western Civilisation and social democracy is based, and in that vision our codes of civility and conventions of restraint have been rooted.