

Trinity 5

St Mary's, Barnes, July 1st, 2018

2 Corinthians, 8, 7-end

The distinguished poet Seamus Heaney once remarked that he thought our society was now running on its religious unconscious and that his grandchildren would not have that. It's a remark well worth reflecting on for its implications at a time when half the population say they have no religion, with a higher percentage than that amongst young people.

Western society and its values were built on the foundation of the Christian faith. What will it be built on in the future? Moral philosophy will be no help for that offers only a cacophony of competing voices- but perhaps we should not worry too much about that, for if the British have little appetite for theology they have even less for moral philosophy. The fact is that most people's values come to them through their families and these tend to be taken on board through a process of osmosis rather than conscious reflection. And we can take some comfort from the fact that all people, whether or not they have a religious faith, or any conscious philosophy have some capacity for discerning what is right and wrong. This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. That said, we can still press the question: what is the foundation of our values? In what are they rooted? If a person does not believe in God are they based on anything other than our own preferences, and if it is only a matter of our own preferences what makes the choice of what is good and right any more significant than the choice of chocolate rather than strawberry ice cream?

When it comes to Christians however there is clear answer in today's, Epistle, from the 8th chapter of St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. This concerns a collection which Paul was organising for fellow Christians in Jerusalem who were poor and in particular

suffering from a famine that struck about the year 46. It was not an easy job, no bank transfers, no cheques. Actual physical money had to be raised from all the churches in the West of what is now Turkey and Northern Greece. This money had to be physically transported across dangerous roads and treacherous seas. It is clear that the success of this enterprise meant a very great deal to St Paul, and it occupied his mind over a period of some 12 years. In addition to the dangers of robbery on the way, there was always the question of trust within the Christian communities themselves, which is why he makes a point of sending two trusted Christians to Corinth to encourage them in their giving. But why should they take part? Paul gives two main answers, and both have significance in relation to the wider question about the basis of our values. First, he says

“You know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.”

He is thinking primarily of the incarnation, of how God in his total self-giving emptied himself and accepted the limitations of ordinary human living that we might share in the richness of Christ’s own divine nature. In other words, he directs the Church to the character of God himself, which they are to reflect. It is a matter of recognition and response. It is the same as the pattern in the Hebrew Scriptures, where the community of Israel is told “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God, am holy.” Again, it is this same pattern we see in Christ’s own teaching. Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies, not just our friends, for God loves everyone with an equal love so “You shall be perfect as your heavenly father in perfect.”

So, the first thing to be said about morality from a Christian point of view is that it is a matter of recognition and response. It is based firmly on what God has revealed of himself and our response is so to reflect this in our behaviour that we grow into his likeness. It is this which undergirds, guides and nourishes our whole approach to questions of ethics. Of course, in the complexity of life a great deal of hard thought is often required to work out what is right or wrong in a

particular situation but the fundamental framework in which that thought is to be set is quite clear. What he has revealed of his generosity and goodness in Christ and our calling to grow in that likeness.

The second main reason Paul gives to urge the Corinthians to share wholeheartedly in this giving is because, as he put it.

“It is a question of equality, At the moment your surplus meets their needs, but one day your need may be met from their surplus.”

In short, he is stressing the solidarity of Christians with one another, the fact that in Christ we belong together, in interdependence and mutuality. It brings to mind his famous image of the body, in which if one suffers they all suffer. So, this is another guiding principle, the fact that we belong together in the body of Christ.

The poet Stevie Smith had a love/hate relationship with the Christian faith. She was hugely attracted to it but found some of its teaching totally unacceptable and in the end rejected it but worried about the implications of this. She wrote a despairing poem containing the lines “If we do not learn to teach children to be good without enchantment...we shall kill everybody.” For her the Christian faith had a supreme enchantment but she had rejected it, and worried about what would happen in a world without it.

Enchantment is a good word, for it points to the beauty and love of God that draws us and takes hold of us, and it is through this that our whole outlooks is shaped and nourished. The jury is still out as to whether in a secular society people can, as she put it, learn to be good without enchantment. For ourselves, we rejoice in that enchantment and pray that it may indeed guide and nourish all we do. We look to what God has made known of himself in Christ and seek to respond. This is the unshakeable foundation. In responding we grow into the divine likeness in whose image we are made.