

Monday 30th June 2008 – Clergy Conference 2008

Talk by The Rt Revd David Atkinson, Bishop of Thetford

Taken from www.norwich.anglican.org

Jesus Christ is Lord

Phil. 2 . 1 – 13

Matt.22. 15 – 22



The Lace-Maker, Jan Vermeer

Taken from Olga's Gallery, www.abcgallery.com

There is an episode of *Yes Minister* in which Jim Hacker is remonstrating with Sir Humphrey Appleby about the sale of British arms abroad. Hacker comments that Humphrey seems to be obsessed with rules of government, even in the face of a moral issue of these proportions.

‘Humphrey, I can’t believe it. We’re talking about good and evil.’

‘Ah’ says Humphrey, ‘Church of England problem’.

‘No Humphrey, our problem. We are discussing right and wrong.’

‘You may be, Minister’, he replied smoothly, ‘but I am not. It would be a terrible misuse of government time... Government is not about morality.’

‘Really? Then what is it about?’

‘It is about stability. Keeping things going, preventing anarchy, stopping society from falling to bits. Still being here tomorrow.’

I think, on some things, as ever, Sir Humphrey is right. Government is about stability, keeping things going, stopping society from falling to bits. But I think it is about many other things too. And where Sir Humphrey seems to me plainly wrong is to suggest that government is somehow value free, somehow not about morality, that politics has nothing to do with good and evil, and that such things can be neatly separated off from the business of politics and put in a religious compartment called The Church of England.

The refrain we often hear that ‘The Church should keep out of politics’ is, I think, as unhelpful as was the opposite point of view attributed to Lord Melborne who, on hearing a fervent preacher, remarked that if religion were now going to start interfering into matters of a person’s private life, things had come to a pretty pass.

For if our faith means anything in practice, it offers a vision of the world as the sphere of God’s purposes which includes building a community of people into his family, whose personal and corporate life together finds its fulfillment and joy in reflecting something of God’s life, God’s love, God’s goodness and God’s justice. It also offers resources of grace through which to work at bringing that vision into being.

And yet we find among ourselves a range of responses by Christian people to ‘the world’. There is the inclusiveness of ‘God so loved the world’; there is the world, along with the flesh and the devil which we are to resist; and then in Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Green Knight* we meet Bellamy who had decided in the middle of life’s journey ‘to abandon the world and become some sort of religious person.’

On the one hand there is what we may call the ‘avertive’ view of Sir Humphrey and Lord Melborne, and of those who see the world as an evil place from which Christians are called to come apart and be separate. On the other hand there are those who are nearer to the transformative view of Calvin, who sees the world as the object of God’s love, grieves over its evils, and believes in engagement with and transformation of the world towards the kingdom of Christ.

On this view, Jesus Christ is Lord of politics, of art, of science, of history. And that requires of us not only the recovery of our vision, but also requires our attention - attention to the world in which we live and work.

I have chosen some paintings from Jan Vermeer as the backdrop for these talks. This one, *The Lacemaker*, is in the Louvre in Paris. Here is someone giving attention. Vermeer for me manages to create a spirituality of the ordinary, what George Herbert calls ‘heaven in ordinary’ an engagement with the world which acknowledges and expresses in the world and in the present moment, something of the light of God.

Do you know these lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who *sees*, takes off his shoes.
The rest sit around it, and pluck blackberries.

Attention, engagement, transformation.

One New Testament text which seems to support an avertive view, but which I think actually offers a transformative approach is the tantalizing paragraph in which the Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, and Jesus asks them to show him a coin. ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said ‘Caesar’s’. Then Jesus said to them ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ At first sight this seems to separate the realm of faith from

the political world. But I think there is a great deal to be said for Tertullian's interpretation: Give to Caesar what bears his image, and give to God what bears his image. And what does bear God's image? All human beings do. Tertullian says 'while you give your money to Caesar, you give yourself – including your money – to God.' Or, as we might elaborate: there is nothing which belongs to the Revenue and Customs which does not first and more importantly belong to God.

Another way of saying this is to speak of the goodness of the created order - that of all his work of creation God said 'This is good!' That is not to say that the world is not touched by sin and fallenness and is in need of redemption; but it is to speak of a transformative attitude towards God's world, a salvation of the created order which is achieved through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of all things in heaven and on earth, he is Lord. At the end of Matthew's Gospel the risen Jesus says "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me".

The great missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin gave some lectures in Brazil in 1996. In them he writes: "All of us need to know who is finally in charge. As far as the great majority of the people among whom I live are concerned, it is taken for granted that the final authority is the free market. The free market is the power against which even the largest governments confess themselves to be powerless. It is the sovereign power ruling public life.'

But if it is true that all authority is given to Jesus, if he is Lord, if there is nothing which belongs to the realm of the free market which does not much more importantly belong to him, then we are faced with the question which lord we serve and obey. This was the issue faced in Philippi when Paul quoted that subversive political statement 'every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.' There was one lord - the emperor; and now Jesus Christ. The question was which lord they would obey. Paradoxically, to obey the lord of this world was the route to servitude; to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord opens us to the freedom of a world which is in God's hands, and which sets us free to act transformatively within it and to engage with the world as the gift of God's good creation. And the mode of our transformative engagement is service.

Bishop Peter Selby made the same point in a discussion of the power of globalization with reference to the choice of powers referred to in this paragraph from Ephesians:

"God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead... and seated him far above all rule and authority and power.."

Peter Selby says 'there is a choice of powers... communion has to be established by drawing on that power which is uniquely the means the church has to employ - Jesus Christ in his justice, his search for those at the margins of the world's life, and by his means of grace.'

I hope that in these homilies together these three days we will explore some aspects of what it means to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ over different aspects of our lives - social, political, global, artistic, scientific and so on. That means engaging with, and giving attention to, the world as the context in which Christ's lordship is expressed and for which his kingdom is coming. And it means working hard at what we mean by service.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.... God has highly exalted him, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.