

Sunday 15 February: Second Sunday before Lent

Discerning Christ – a corporate responsibility

Readings: Colossians 1.15-20; John 1.1-14

On the few occasions I have been with someone to court I have been profoundly grateful to be neither a judge nor, so far, a defendant in the dock. 'Judge not that ye be not judged' is one of the sayings of Jesus that is the wisdom of self-preservation. The fun had by the tabloid press when a Judge has been caught speeding with someone else's wife is probably only beaten when the clergy are shown to be hypocritical, preferably in relation to money and sex. Those who sit in judgement on their peers, like those who preach, live in glass houses and we are well advised not to throw stones.

It seems to me that the courts try very hard not to dehumanise those who come before them on the wrong side of the law. Being accused and found guilty is humiliating enough, the sort of thing that would shock most of us not to do whatever it was again. Punishment is supposed to reinforce a process of penitence and conversion. Some get used to it, or despair that life could ever be different for them, but most of us thank God we never have to face these sorts of things in public.

The Parliamentary interrogation of a few senior bankers this week was characterised by a public self-righteousness that pretended that the rest of us all saw clearly what was going on and have never behaved in ways that were so stupid or selfish. It was only the few people 'in charge' who persisted in driving at full speed into the crash because they stood to make such huge personal gains. None of the rest of us have sold property for an absurd profit or gratefully remortgaged the house to pay the children's college fees. Nor were we pleased when our pension funds profited from rising property prices and the stock market.

Reporters scoffed at the 'captains of industry' who had been coached to answer the select committee's questions and complained at their weasel word apologies that failed to take responsibility for causing this 'turn of events'. Perhaps that phrase was the biggest clue these people were not as 'in charge' as their commanding salaries had suggested. After over three hours of questioning in the spotlight they looked pretty shaken. It's easier to be angry at individuals than things. When Jesus said we must forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven, I suppose he knew that one day it might be us asking to be forgiven.

We're in a mess, and we're in it together no matter who took the lead on the way here.

In today's Collect we prayed that God would, "Teach us to discern your hand in all your works". Discerning the ways of God is top priority and the economic crisis is a case in point. We are trying to find our bearings. Predictably Christians are saying different things.

On Friday the Bishop of London got into trouble with the Evening Standard for saying that some people who have lost their job will feel relief at being able to get off the treadmill. Most will not, so his view was contrasted unfavourably with the sympathetic prayer written by the Bishop of Ripon and Leeds and the compassion of the Archbishop of York for those who have lost their jobs and feel bereft.

I have found myself thinking about a Brazilian Bishop I met over 15 years or so ago who said that he prayed every day for the collapse of the world's economic order as his country was in so much debt that they could never keep up with interest payments and just got poorer and poorer. Has his prayer been answered and what he would think about our government propping up a broken system with no redistributive agenda so that the poor remain the worst off?

This week I sat in on a meeting of about 70 people which began with each person saying one thing about how the recession is affecting them. Roughly three out of four spoke about their family losing jobs, pensions, homes. They did not see this as a good thing. Indeed, you could feel the growing anxiety and fear in the group as their individual stories made the cumulative picture clearer.

These different responses to the crisis are to some extent a case of where you stand determining what you see. If you have been well paid for many years in the City of London, and have accumulated resources, it might come as a relief to be able to get off the treadmill and re-evaluate your life, but I bet for most it does not, and the more common response is of fear. If you have no savings and what comes in goes out, you can't absorb a downturn. You lose both living standards and control. If you are at the bottom of the pile, life's going to get even tougher. In these circumstances, what is the process of discernment by which we will see the ways of God?

The letter to the Colossians contains some of the great passages of the New Testament: "May the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Col 3.16). In Colossians, as in the prologue to John's Gospel, Christ is identified as the creative wisdom of God, before all things, and in all things. In this company the wisdom that jumped out from the Book of Proverbs at Morning Prayer this week is pretty obvious: that the person who loves money will never be satisfied. Our lives have to be set in something bigger, deeper, more important.

And, wealth does matter. Poor people know that better than most. In London, if you live in Hackney you have fewer opportunities, more illness and die younger than if you live in Kensington and Chelsea. But material possessions, economic goods, are not the meaning or the measure of life, though of course life is easier if we organise things so that people have enough to eat. If St Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians it was written from prison. Out of his suffering and being in chains comes a letter which says our human solidarity comes from our faith in Christ in whom we find our unity because in him all things are held together. "He is the firstborn of all creation... The head of the body, the church... For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace.. through [the] cross." (Col 1.15-20) Perhaps through this economic crisis we will come to see that wealth is not a good on its own but it has to be shared responsibly because we exist not just as individuals but together in one body.

It is in imitation of the nature of God in Christ that the letter to the Colossians emphasises the virtues of humility. "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other: just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (Col 3.12-14)

Seeking to live in imitation of Christ is our calling. In him we are bound together, not just as church, but as church witnessing to the unity of all creation. Live in the context of the big story – either the Colossians hymn that was our epistle or the prologue of John’s Gospel which was today’s Gospel reading– and what you get is the real meaning of corporate responsibility, the responsibility of the whole body not just of a business or organisation. It is good, generous, unified and hopeful. In it is the sort of faith that proclaims, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never overcome it”. And oddly enough, it’s this extraordinary faith in Christ which creates and sustains a high sense of our worth and purpose in being human, *and* a modesty that knows our place in the creative order and can prevent destructive selfishness.

In any crisis we are thrown back to re-examine and discern our self-understanding. If we recognise that self is joined with Christ, even in the most difficult circumstances, there is a very great deal of hope.