

## Thursday 1 May 2008: Ascension Day

Writing in The Times the other day, the Marxist columnist Mick Hume described public fascination with the Shannon Matthews case – and specifically the prurient media interest in the lifestyles of many on her estate - as a sort of pornography of poverty.

There is, he argued, something really rather unpleasant about a society that takes such obvious delight in sneering and leering at the economically disadvantaged. He went on: “Two hundred years ago the respectable classes paid a penny to enjoy the sexual and violent antics of the insane at Bedlam. Today people make do with mocking a Dewsbury estate.” According to this analysis, we have almost come to regard the poor as the moral villains of society rather than its victims.

Contrast this, then, with the message of St Luke: ‘Blessed are you who are poor’. Not, I hasten to add the considerably more anaemic ‘Blessed are the poor in heart’ from St Matthew’s Gospel. No, Luke gives it to us straight. So, for example, where Matthew’s version of the Christmas story has the baby Jesus greeted by wise men with expensive presents, Luke has the child met by agricultural labourers. It sets the tone for his entire story: ‘Blessed are the poor’.

What he does not mean, of course, is that poverty is any sort of good thing in itself. I know that sounds like an observation from the school of the incredibly obvious, but there have been way too many Christians - and particularly those who have misunderstood monasticism - that have regarded poverty as a training in humility and therefore a moral virtue. No: the poor are not blessed because they lead lives of designer simplicity or moral superiority. It’s not a lifestyle choice. Poverty is about malnutrition, infant mortality, living in a disgusting favela or freezing to death in a cardboard box. These are not the ways of moral edification.

‘Blessed are you who are poor’ does not mean that poverty is virtuous: it means that God is to be found amongst the poor; that God is on their side. And what follows from this is that, for Christians, sneering at the poor, dismissing people as chavs or hoodies, is actually a form of blasphemy.

It’s quite remarkable to me that anybody might think this even the slightest bit theologically controversial, given that the Bible contains literally thousands of references to economic injustice. It’s actually the second most prominent theme in the whole of Scripture - the first being idolatry, which is itself often linked with the love of money. The great crescendos of the Biblical narrative insist again and again on the central significance of this theme. Mary speaks of God as bringing down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly, of filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away with nothing. Jesus continues where his mother left off: “I come to bring good news to the poor, freedom to the captive, sight to the blind.”

Whatever happened to the church that preached these values? Back in the mid twentieth century, following the ground breaking Second Vatican council, the buzz in the Roman Catholic Church was all about liberation theology. It was especially prominent in South America, with priests and theologians arguing that the church ought to adopt a preferential option for the poor. Salvation, they said, was as much a practical thing, a liberation from the bondage of slavery and debt, with Jesus as the new Moses leading the oppressed out of the captivity of poverty and into the promised land of freedom and prosperity.

But the official church never really warmed to this sort of preaching, suspecting its motives of being too political, more Marx than Moses. John Paul II's deep hatred of Communism gave him a moral blind spot that led him to overlook the fact that liberation theology was a way of living out a clear Biblical imperative as expressed in St Luke's very practical Christ.

But the Pope was completely right that Communism isn't the same thing as the Gospel. Moreover, the idea that poverty is simply a left wing issue is dangerously unhelpful. For with the collapse of international socialism those at the bottom of the heap are in desperate need of new ideas, new friends, and new hope. Yet it's hard to see these new friends emerging, even within the church.

In Latin America, liberation theology has been shouldered aside by those who prefer their religion more otherworldly, more churchy or more charismatic. And in this country many Christians have been giving up on the material dimension of God's purpose for humanity.

We are increasingly thinking of religion as though it were some sort of self-help therapy, all about one's mental and spiritual well being or some strange esoteric knowledge. Thus we end up with an introverted piety that spends its time gazing up into heaven and a practical indifference to the material conditions of those who live next door.

This may be why I have a bit of a problem with the way some people understand the Feast Day of the Ascension. There is something faintly comic about a whole bunch of people, gazing up into the clouds, imagining a final fleeting glimpse of the soles of Jesus' feet. More problematically: the Ascension can represent an over-fascination with the ethereal aspects of faith to the neglect and detriment of the physical.

It must be remembered then that Christianity is arguably the most materialistic of the world's religious faiths. For with Christianity, God is imagined not as a cloud, nor as a book, but as a human being, born in a shed, and at one with the physical reality of human life. With Christianity, God is to be found in the dirt and not in the sky. That's why the Ascension can be so misleading.

But there is, of course, a quite different way of understanding the Ascension that is fully consistent with a more earthy theology. The book of Acts describes two angels present at the scene. "Men of Galilee" they say with more than a hint of mockery, "why do you stand staring into heaven?" It's a great question. For not only does it puncture that misleading religious cliché that up somehow equals holy, it also invites the disciples to bring their gaze down to earth and confront the measure of the task now before them. A heartbeat after Jesus' departure comes the terrifying question: what on earth are we to do now? How are we to accomplish what we pray for - to create the kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven?

This remarkable church of St Martin in the Fields gives us a clue. Under our feet, deep within the earth, wonderful new facilities for London's poorest people have been dug out in a feat of the most extraordinary engineering. If you want to find God round here, follow the advice of the angels and cease gazing up into the sky. For God lives downstairs, alongside the homeless, the outcast and the refugee. Any church worthy of the name must be built right on top of a concern for the vulnerable, just as this church is quite literally.

One more thing. The theological emphasis on practical Christianity has the added advantage of being something uniting within society. In an age where religion is so often the source of division, a preferential option for the poor can bring together atheists and agnostics and fundamentalists and liberals, uniting people of all faiths and of none. This does not make it

any less authentically Christian. Jesus himself put it pretty clearly: “in so much as you did it to the least of these my brother and sisters, you did it also to me.”

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