



The Church in the Modern World

Hope in Christ and the Empire of Things

21 May 2017

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Exodus 17: 1-7 John 4: 5-14, 19-26

Tomorrow is the 25th anniversary of my consecration as a bishop. It is also the feast of St Rita of Cascia, patron saint of impossible causes and abused wives. In 1992 it seemed an appropriate day to begin work as a bishop. At the end of the service I was told to go to the door of the Cathedral and bless the city and the world. One solitary cab driver caught the blessing full blast – there was no one else there.

It was not surprising. For some time the commentariat had been saying that the story of God in the world would have only one end – relegation to the leisure sector; a harmless hobby for people with antiquarian interests who enjoy sniffing the odour rising from gently mouldering hassocks. The same year, 1992, saw the publication of Francis Fukuyama's celebrated book *The End of History*. The thesis was that the human project had reached its consummation in liberal democracy and market economics. By the time of the embarrassing Millennium celebrations, the Christmas edition of the Economist carried an obituary of God.

God was superfluous in *The Empire of Things*, the title of a significant book written by Frank Trentmann and published last year. It is the fascinating story of how in the past half millennium we have been emancipated from 'less is more' and become wedded to 'more and more'. Moralists from left and right have thundered and denounced unnecessary consumption but stuff has continued to pile up. Part of the reason, as the book makes clear, is that it is a fundamental mistake to draw too sharp a distinction between things and emotional satisfaction. The Empire of Things has expanded because possessions have become increasingly important carriers of identity, memory and emotion.

Millions of people enjoy a standard of health care and material prosperity unparalleled in human history and this is something to celebrate. The problem is that the infinite expansion of the Empire of Things in a project of growth without limit with no end in view beyond the accumulation of more and more things, is unsustainable. The earth's resources are being used up, especially space and water. Human beings are profoundly thirsty animals, thirsty for meaning in life, thirsty for relationships, thirsty for love. The word in Hebrew for a human soul is 'nephesh' which can also mean 'a throat'.

The most profound human thirst cannot be entirely satisfied by activity at the ego-mental level, where we choose and consume to fulfil ourselves. In St John's gospel, the image of living waters is associated with the gift of the Spirit who creates relationships beyond ourselves – with the Beyond all, with our neighbour, with the creation of which we are a part and with the dark continent within us. Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, the water from the well will only satisfy your thirst for the moment 'but whosoever drinketh of the water I shall give him will never thirst; but the water I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up to everlasting life'.

Jesus teaches that the most profound thirst is only satisfied by an encounter with the Holy Spirit who opens up the channels of communication heart to heart, subject to subject. It is humility, being close to the humus that opens up the possibility of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, who came in the form of a servant, taught that the first step in becoming a mature human being is to refuse to be a little tin god. His place of baptism in the river Jordan is, at more than 1300 feet below sea level, the lowest point on earth.

Much of St John's Gospel is a meditation on the life of Moses and there are echoes of our first lesson in the gospel reading. The answer to human thirst is not entertaining some religious ideas about God but encountering the Spirit of the Living God. Having the world cannot bring the joy in life and the assurance in death that comes from being 'a partaker', as St Peter says, 'of the divine life', a partner with the myriad life forms of the divine creation, a being in communion with other beings and liberated from the addictions and the egotism which inhibit our freedom to love without distortion.

What the Church has to offer is not an ideology or a mere critique of the Empire in which we dwell but a community in which the Spirit of Jesus Christ dwells. In a market place of strident salesmen, of warring ideologies, we seek not to add to the din but to build relationships that endure and give meaning to life.

One of the authentic prophets of our time is Jean Vanier, whose friendship with a person with severe learning disabilities was the foundation for the L'Arche communities. The first one opened in 1964 in France and L'Arche communities are now present in many different countries. By living in intentional community with people, some of whom have serious learning difficulties and some of whom have other challenges, by living with diversity and difference, we open ourselves up to grow and be transformed. I know that is true because I received my earliest call to genuine priesthood through my brother, who had very severe learning difficulties but a genius for love.

Jean Vanier's work is a prophetic word for the church today. We are not called to be a sectarian church composed of ideologists like those which the great 17th century Anglican theologian Sir Thomas Browne denounced as 'heads that are disposed unto schism and ... naturally indisposed for a community' but 'do subdivide and mince themselves almost into atoms'. Members of the Church of England say that they are 'part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church'. The Great and Coming church is ahead of us. We must cherish our Christian friends and never forget what Pope John Paul II said to Archbishop Runcie, 'affective collegiality is the basis of effective collegiality'. We should seek partnerships in the gospel at whatever level we are working. We should seek alliances in the wider household of faith in building a servant community that is genuinely attractive.

Jesus Christ commanded us to re-member him and to be re-membered into his body, the Church. We have not always re-membered him, rather we have often dis-membered him and this is tragedy because our calling as a Church is to prepare the way into the coming world, the world of the great and coming church, servant and midwife of the end time as it is described by the greatest poet of the Christian West, Dante, who saw 'all the scattered leaves of the universe bound together in one volume, by love'.

Christians serve at a time of great promise and great peril. Some people are reacting to change by insisting on ever narrower definitions of their identity. As the unchallengeable Western hegemony of the past two hundred years gives way to a more multi-polar world, there is the possibility of conflict. We do not exorcise the Satanic by creating a spiritual vacuum. Those who identify with the Church of England, should be proud to be members of a church not afraid to reason or ashamed to adore. But our identity is nested in wider identities which are also ours. In an increasingly post-denominational world we are first and foremost simply Christians seeking to serve the world in a spirit of humility. IS does not make distinctions between Christian denominations in its campaign of terror and it is about time that we did the same in our pursuit of a wider 'us' which embraces the whole universe.

The Church is called to be a transforming community reaching after a wider and wider sense of 'us'. Anchored in the scriptures, read in company with other Christians through the ages, we have been given an insight into the deep structure of God's purposes beneath and beyond the pressure of the passing moment. 'The hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him.'