



The Church in the Modern World

Consumerism

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Genesis 3: 6–11, 21 Matthew 3: 13–17

To take consumerism as my theme may seem a little unnecessary or even perverse. I am just back from Los Angeles where you may well pass a Bentley showroom and a day spa for dogs on your way to the Gucci store. Cambridge is not quite so obviously a consumer heaven – and let’s face it, most Fellows of Trinity would be more likely mistaken for vagrants than deemed fashion idols. But bear with me a while, and I hope to persuade you that even in a town which is not devoted to shopping, the issue of consumerism is not irrelevant.

But I start somewhere else. In the 4th century, St Martin of Tours – a super league saint back in the day, even if not so well known now – met a poor man in bitter weather and, if we are to believe the many depictions of the scene, with a theatrical flourish chopped his cloak in two with his sword (Martin being by repute a conscripted Roman soldier), and gave away half of the cloak to the said poor man. Dramatic indeed – dramatic enough to ensure Martin’s fame and recognizability in those countless depictions. But not so dramatic that Martin could not be outdone by the greatest master of street-theatre sanctity, St Francis of Assisi – for he, in what was probably the first sign of his turning his back on his privileged and indulgent youthful existence, meeting a poor knight, a man of noble birth who had fallen on hard times and was poorly clothed, offered him not only the entirety of his very fine cloak, but took off all of his ‘garments and clothed the man on the spot’.¹ No chopping in half here – no half measures at all for St Francis.

Well, St Francis was the master of the theatrical gesture – and taking off his clothes was a very regular ploy, though typically merely the prelude to more elaborate dramas. Thus to take only one example – when he suspected himself of slight indulgence during an illness (he had eaten a morsel of meat, somewhat thoughtlessly), he rose from his bed on a cold day, still sick, had a noose placed around his neck, and was led through the town naked, proclaiming himself a glutton, while one of his brother friars was charged with heaping ashes on his head. But for all that Francis was very ready to resort to the dramatic gesture, there is something going on in that first piece of theatre, the giving away of the whole cloak, besides the mere wish of Francis to draw attention to himself as the new Martin, only more so – a something else that we can get at by contrasting the social context of the two saints.

¹ As recounted by Bonaventura, 532.

When St Martin gave away half his cloak at the end of the 4th century, he did so in a world in which there was a desperate need for goods to be shared, 'redistributed between the old rich and the new poor'.² By the time of St Francis, at the very beginning of the 13th century, things were not much different in that respect. The poor were still poor, and the rich were still rich. But something had changed in the time between the fourth century and the thirteenth, in the time between Martin and Francis – something which stood in the way of that redistribution, something which made it more unlikely to occur. And what had changed was our relationship to goods, to material possessions. Somehow possessions had become more captivating than before, newly capable of possessing us in more telling ways, so that it was no longer enough for a saint simply to share his or her cloak. Rather than sharing possessions, Francis had to renounce them in a radical gesture of dispossession, protesting against, and posing a question to, this new relationship to possessions.

What was this relationship? How had it come about? What was new in 13th century Assisi as against 4th century Gaul? In one crucial respect, Martin and Francis's locations were alike. Francis was an urban figure, and so was Martin, perhaps the first high profile saint to be located in the town, rather than in the arena, the desert or the monastery, where saints had been made previously. But though Martin and Francis were both townies, Francis had grown up in one of the Italian cities in which a new form of urban and economic life had come into being.³ In these cities modern industrial manufacture was stirring; great fairs and markets were displacing a world of self-sufficiency or barter; and money, and the servants of money, the money-changers who would become the great bankers of the Renaissance, were emerging – it was in the 13th century that gold ducats and florins (named for Florence) were first minted.⁴

What this all amounted to was that the new economic life of the towns created new possibilities for personal spending – and the most immediate outlet for this spending was on clothes, the attraction of which, the young St Francis (the dressy son of a wealthy cloth merchant) knew only too well. Clothes were becoming, what they have been ever since in the West, a way of claiming status or worth, a status no longer settled simply by birth and rank, but now by property and possessions – and crucially, and most immediately, by clothes. Here, in this new possibility for spending and self-presentation, Francis diagnosed the very beginnings of what would become consumerism.

But what is consumerism? Humans have always been consumers in one sense – all biological life depends on consumption for its continued existence. But 'consumerism' only comes into being when consumption is not simply a routine necessity, but when material possessions become somehow freighted with added charge and meaning, as central to who we are, to our identities, as crucial to our sense of ourselves and of our worth. For material objects to fulfil this role, they must become the stuff of dreams if you like, endowed in our minds with quasi-magical properties. At the far end of this process of the freighting of material goods, the process the beginnings of which Francis sensed, lies the triumph of the brand in our day – when it is not how the shirt looks which matters,

2 Goff, 27.

³ These cities – Florence, Bologna, Assisi, Perugia and Assisi itself – had risen far above their surrounding countryside, so that, unlike the cities of previous eras, they were no longer merely administrative hubs for wider and more important district, but themselves the centres of cultural, political and more especially economic life.

⁴ It was in the 13th century that avarice would replace pride in poll position in popular rankings of the deadly sins.

but the label or logo it bears; when your choice of the make of your laptop or phone is not a matter of its technical prowess, but of its coolness; when you feel a subtle but pressing need to change your car because there is a new model on the market, the most important feature of which is just that it is the newest – and therefore the best. In this world of consumerism, goods become essential aspects of our identities, proof to ourselves and others that we are worthy of regard – and without which we are, well, naked.

And it is because of the birth of consumerism, that Francis couldn't give away just half of his cloak, but had to give away the whole cloak, and the rest of his gear too – because these very things, these clothes, had come to be so freighted with significance that they were themselves a bar to the simple charity which St Martin showed. Paradoxically, Martin could give away half of his cloak just because it wasn't difficult to give away the whole of it – Francis had to give away the whole of his cloak, because it had become so very difficult to give away even half. His contemporaries had become budding consumers, which is why, to preach to them, and to us, Francis was always taking his clothes off, shedding the first consumer goods of the modern era, and why his simplest injunction was 'Naked, follow the naked Christ'.

Nakedness, literal or metaphorical, is not a very tolerable condition for most of us, and not one we are good at resolving for ourselves. (If I may speak personally for a moment, I was somewhat discombobulated recently by receiving an email from someone in Germany who was asking for pictures for her project on the nude academic – in fact her project was on the academic nude, which is totally different, and she wanted a copy of the picture above the altar.) Our first parents, Adam and Eve, as our first lesson tells us, found their perfectly natural nakedness wholly intolerable. Now what bothers us about nakedness is just our awareness of our being seen critically by others, which is, of course, the very awareness which lies behind consumerism. How do we appear to others? And Adam and Eve addressed the problem of their appearance by stitching clothes for themselves – but this first exercise in fashion was obviously something of a failure, since only a few verses later, God, without bothering to comment, provides them with another set of clothes himself.

What does that signify? It is, surely, a parable which speaks to the failures of our efforts at self-clothing. Our efforts at covering our nakedness and securing our identities and our worth, by acquiring possessions, even the very latest and best possessions, leave us vulnerable to the marketing of the next best model, which tomorrow will itself be yesterday's thing and is already, today, on the way out. What we need, as Adam and Eve needed, is for God to clothe us more adequately, to supply us with a more secure basis for our identities and self-esteem than even the best possessions.

And how does God do that? Remember that Francis's injunction was 'naked, follow the naked Christ'. Christ was naked at his birth, at his death, and also at his baptism. Each of those three moments of his life deserve attention and reflection – but let us turn finally to Christ's baptism, as we heard of it in our second lesson, when we were told that Jesus was baptised not for his own sake, but for ours. John would have forbidden him – 'I need to be baptised by you', says John. 'Let it be so now', replies Jesus, 'for it is fitting that we should fulfil the demands of righteousness'. Why was it fitting? Because it was the very meaning of Christ's existence that he should live a righteous life before God – not for his sake, but for ours. It was fitting that he should fulfil the demands of righteousness just so that as we are baptised with and into his baptism, we may be found in him, and so too

found righteous. At our baptism we are given names – Christian names we call them – the names of those who belong to Christ, those whose identity comes from that belonging, before any other. So we may and must dare to believe that that voice which thundered from heaven as Christ arose from the waters of Jordan and declared ‘This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased’, is a voice which speaks over us at our baptisms. I like to put it very bluntly at baptisms: if parents bring their child to baptism, they take home a child of God, a brother or sister to Jesus Christ, in whom God is well pleased. A naked child is placed in the font, and emerges, clothed in Christ.

I said a while back, that 4th century Gaul and 13th century Assisi were not very different in one respect, however much the early stirrings of consumerism made them different in other respects. There was both in the 4th century and in the 13th century a desperate need for a redistribution of goods, to address the plight of the poor – and you know as well as I do, that there is the same need now – the story of most countries over the last 25 years is that the rich are richer and the poor poorer. And the poverty of the most poor is as abject as ever.

I admitted at the outset that most of us here are not top of league consumers. There are plenty who outdo us. But just as well, I doubt that anyone here is untouched by the currents of consumerism, and all of us must find our way in a world in which acquiring and possessing are endlessly commended to us as worthy ends of life and action. It is not fashionable for clergy to exhort their congregations, but I am, I believe, within my rights in praying for you, especially for those who are leaving Cambridge this year, and must find their way in a world given to consumerism. And I pray for you, as for myself, that we may remember our baptisms, remember that we, though naked, were clothed by the naked Christ. If we remember that, we may remember too, in the time God now gives us to amend our lives, that we have no need of other clothing – certainly not the supposedly magical clothing promised by consumerism, the clothing of possessions which will make us the lovable, admirable, people we want to be. And if we do remember that, we don’t need to try ourselves to match the dramatic street theatre of that holy man Francis, whose radical act of dispossession served to protest at the binding ties of possessions. We may, however, remembering that protest, be liberated, as those who are not possessed by their possessions, to embrace the simple human charity of St Martin, which our world needs no less now than it did in the time of the saints.