

God, the Church and the 'Bedroom Tax'

A sermon preached at St Laurence's Church, Ludlow in Lent 2013

God and the nature of our society – our human society – belong together. That's the argument of distinguished Anglican theologian, Dan Hardy. So how, he wonders, has an ostensibly Christian Church and nation managed to marginalize God in their thinking about politics and society? We assume, says Hardy, that God is somehow disengaged from the world.

That assumption, according to the Bible, could hardly be more wrong. From Abraham onwards, God is deeply involved in the world he has made – every bit of it –, as his covenant, first with Abraham, then with the people of Israel, shows. Call it God's covenant, God's commonwealth, or –as in the gospels, God's Kingdom – it embraces every part of life.

The two foundation stones of God's commonwealth, according to the Old Testament prophets, are righteousness and justice. 'Righteousness' is 'Bible-speak' for the will and purpose of the Creator; justice is its practical consequence.

So tampering with the scales in the shop, wishing the Sabbath away so that business as usual could resume, 'grinding the faces of the poor'... - all that's a denial of God's covenant and commonwealth, according to the prophet Amos.

Or, to modernize a passage from Isaiah, what's the point in giving up things for Lent, if we forget about the families in Ludlow who haven't enough money to put food on the table for their children, or if we forget about the old man in the town huddling in blankets in front of a small electric fire? (South Shropshire is one of the worst areas in the country for fuel poverty).

So, in writing our report *Ludlow Under Pressure*, we believed we were on firm biblical foundations. God's covenant, God's commonwealth, embraces politics, economics, society – everything. It must not be reduced to a political programme, whether of the left or the right. But we may not spiritualize it either. (And spiritualizing God's commonwealth is far more common in this country than making it too political).

A leading politician once told the Methodist preacher, Lord Soper, at an Oxford Union debate that the Church should confine itself to spiritual matters, but politicians had to live in the real world. In reply, Lord Soper quoted St Paul:

'When I was a child, I spoke like a child...'

A mature Christian faith engages with the world as it is – as God did in Christ, and goes on doing. And so must a prophetic church. So the commonwealth of God was the fundamental reason why Churches Together Around Ludlow held two public meetings in the spring and summer of 2011. At the first, we asked:

'Who are the hardest hit people in Ludlow in this economic downturn?'

At the second, we attempted to respond to the Prime Minister's call for a 'big society'.

Our report *Ludlow Under Pressure* was published last November. Its main theme: there are, and there will be rising levels of need all around us, and there are diminishing resources to meet those needs. We identified four key needs: older and younger people at risk, transport problems, and a dire shortage of affordable and social housing.

This is our business – the Church’s business – because of the Bible’s vision of God’s commonwealth. Through the Prophet Jesus we stand in the tradition of Isaiah and Amos. As we’ve heard this morning, St Luke ‘majors’ on Jesus as a prophet – or rather, *the* Prophet. This Prophet’s manifesto we heard in church a few Sundays ago:

‘He has sent me to announce good news to the poor,
To proclaim release for prisoners,
To let broken victims go free....’.

In the next fifteen chapters of his gospel, St Luke describes the prophet Jesus doing just that. The so-called ‘miracles’ of Jesus, (I say ‘so-called’ not because I think they didn’t happen, but because the word ‘miracle’ is not helpful). Whatever we call them, they are a vital template for a church which seeks to embody and to realize the commonwealth of God.

Jesus did three things we can do. He noticed and paid attention to people whom society pushed to the fringes or didn’t even notice: children, a woman with an affliction thought to make her impure, a beggar at the roadside.... – just as we miss the poor because they don’t shop where we shop, or the youngsters known as ‘Neets’ (not in education, employment or training) because – well – where would we meet them, except perhaps loitering on a street corner?

There are many people our society does not notice – or notices only to criticize. Whether our national newspapers follow or shape public opinion in this matter is an interesting point, but the fact remains that some of those newspapers exercise a toxic influence on the life of our country.

Jesus noticed the invisible people on the fringes – and not only noticed them, but brought them into the centre. That was the second thing he did. He welcomed the children, a ‘foreign’ woman, and even a crowd of 5,000 when the disciples wanted to turn all of them – the children, the woman and the crowd – away.

And having brought people like this back into society, he restored them: touched a leper, allowed the ‘impure’ woman to touch him, pronounced their sins forgiven – which means: he lifted from their shoulders the burdens God did not want them to carry. That is the third thing the Church is called to do.

This is the commonwealth of God, and therefore the business of the Church. We may not politicize it; we may not spiritualize it, either. A prophetic church is called to embody it and to realize it. And, having written this report, that is what the churches, represented in CTAL, are now trying to do, with a steering group and four teams, each assigned to one of the key areas.

This is a critical year. There is a mother in Ludlow with two girls in their early teens who may shortly be obliged – by a change of law on April 1st – to uproot her girls from their school here, unless they can take a major ‘hit’ on their already squeezed household budget. (I gather they’ve been offered a house in Bridgnorth).

No Christian may pass judgement on our political leaders. We can, and sometimes we must, criticize their policies in faithfulness to God’s commonwealth. But we may not judge them (write them off) as human beings.

Finally, notice an expression in today’s epistle, often mistranslated and misunderstood: ‘Our commonwealth is in heaven’: St Paul’s message to the Christians at Philippi. Does that contradict the argument of this sermon? No, it doesn’t. One commentator has this to say:

‘It is difficult to exaggerate the theological and political potency of this term “commonwealth”’.

The Philippians knew what Paul meant. Their city was a Roman colony: a bit of imperial Rome transplanted to Greece; a bit of Rome in exile. So they took their marching orders from Rome.

And so with the Church. Having our commonwealth in heaven does not mean being so spiritually minded we are no earthly use. Nor does it mean leaving politics and economics well alone. And all of this because of the One from whom we take our marching orders. Jesus brought God’s commonwealth to earth in a new way; tiny as a mustard seed to begin with, but, like yeast, with the power to spread.

A prophetic Church is committed to embodying and realizing it in what it says and does – like Jesus the Prophet. In this commonwealth God’s business is bringing in the invisible poor from the margins to the centre.

Of course, our country faces enormous problems. The deficit needs fixing. Our welfare and taxation systems need reforming. But in the Christian view of things, in the Biblical understanding, justice is central. And justice means giving everyone their due – fundamentally, their dignity as a human being made in the image of God.

But how does a 17 year old keep her dignity and self-esteem if, month after month or even – God help her! year after year, she can’t get a job? I come back to where I began. Our country, our world, marginalizes God at their peril. And this is not because God is vengeful or vindictive, but because God is our truth; not disengaged at all, but the very Reality in whom we live and move and have our being.

Our idolatries could be the death of us. But they needn’t be. The cross of Jesus Christ judges us all. But the cross is also our hope. The cross is *the* sign that our Creator holds the whole world – in spite of everything – with an everlasting love. And – thank God- His is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.