

Two Cheers for Secularism

Readings: Isaiah chapter 45 verses 1-7; Matthew chapter 22 verses 15-22

This last week David Cameron stirred up a hornets nest by bringing God into the political debate. He was immediately rebuffed by 30 eminent celebrities who said keep God out. It raises an acute issue. For the last 200 years a new process has been at work in the world. It has speeded up recently and constitutes a greater threat to the Church than Communism ever did. Or any other "ism". We call it secularism. And I had better begin by defining it.

By secularism I mean the freeing from Church or religious control of large segments of human life. There was a time when the Church had a controlling finger in every pie. Kings ruled at the pleasure and by permission of the Pope (which is why Henry 8th had a cadenza!!). Political and economic power were in the hands of the Church. So too were public services. The Church pioneered the way in providing hospitals and education. It was the hub of social life. Virtually the whole of life, from the cradle to the grave, was lived under the umbrella of the Church.

All that has gone now. And gone forever. Britain has become a secular arena. Politics & economics and health & education have all been taken over by the State. And God and the Church have been sidelined. As Alistair Campbell famously remarked "We don't do God here". The result is that the Church and Christian Faith have become marginalised and are felt to be irrelevant to daily life. The ordinary man in the street is happy so long as his salary stays two jumps ahead of inflation; his job and family are secure and the health service doesn't go to the dogs. Religion is seen as little more than a crutch for those who are weak and emotionally unstable.

And our response? Our initial reaction might be to deplore the process and try to fight against it. But that would be like King Canute trying to hold back the waves. I think there are reasons to welcome secularism even if we can only give it Two Cheers.

We should welcome it because it forces us back to being a Servant Church.

Jesus never operated from any political or economic power-base. For Him power did not lie in the authority to lord it over others. Greatness, for Him, did not consist in privilege but in service. So it was that, on the night before He died Jesus took a towel and a basin of water and washed his disciples' feet.

In later years the Church acquired power and prestige and wealth. It controlled every aspect of life and provided for every need. That had a downside. It enabled the Church to coerce people into believing. It opened wide the door to spiritual blackmail. "You want an education? Become a Christian!!" At a time of persistent famine in China many people became known as "rice Christians" because the Church was the only Aid Agency supplying food.

Secularism put an end to all that. And rightly so. We should not have to rely on economic or political influence to win peoples' allegiance to Christ. And Jesus himself rejected this way of operating. Before He even began His ministry He went into the desert to formulate a mission strategy. He rejected the temptation to "turn stones into bread" and bribe people into following Him because He could satisfy their material needs. And He rejected the temptation to perform the miraculous to persuade people into faith. Instead He committed Himself to the way of patient, persevering Love and it brought him to a Cross. But Jesus was never more powerful than when His hands were nailed in impotence to that Cross.

So it must be for us. We are a servant church or we are nothing.

It forces us to see God at work in the world.

So long as the Church controlled the levers of power and met all human need people thought that

God's Spirit was operative only in and through the Church. They confined God's activity to the Church.

Secularism has made us look for God in non-religious processes as well. The Church may no longer control the hospitals but every time a miracle drug is discovered; wherever a victory is won over smallpox or AIDS or cholera the Christian shouts for joy and sees the triumph of God's Spirit; — even though the doctor be an atheist!

No longer does the Church control education. But every time a child's eyes light up with a new discovery of Truth; and every time a technological break-through is achieved the Christian rejoices. Even though the teacher be an agnostic and the scientist an unbeliever. For all Truth is the gift of God's Spirit.

No longer does the Church hold political power. But every time a social or economic injustice is righted and righteousness established the Christian rejoices. Even though the politician makes the same claim as Alistair Campbell!

For all Truth, all Goodness, all Righteousness originates from God. And is enabled by His Spirit.

But that is only Two Cheers for secularism. It is not the panacea for all our ills and it has a downside. It is no more than a process and processes by themselves do not achieve Goals and Ends. Like Capitalism and Communism and any other "ism" they are merely a means to an End. It is people who achieve Goals and Ends and secularism has produced a breed of people who classify themselves as secularists.

The failure of the secularists is that they fail to come to terms with the realities of human nature. The fact of the matter is that human nature is fundamentally flawed and biased. We are biased towards an inherent selfishness and self-centeredness which is a carry-over from our evolutionary past. There is, in all of us, a "will to power" and power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely and what is happening in Zimbabwe and Kenya and all over the world is evidence of this. In the language of the Christian Faith "all have sinned". And, as someone once said "when you change your Govt you put one lot of sinners out and another lot of sinners in"!

What is needed is a process and a power which can transform human nature. And that is where the Church is in business. We proclaim that all healing, all truth and all knowledge are the activity of God's Spirit at work in the world. But we also proclaim that alongside healing and truth and knowledge the Spirit of God is the Spirit of Holiness. There is, let loose in all the world, a dynamic which can transform human nature; the Holy Spirit of God. And, without that transformation all the processes in the world will come to nothing.

The Church is in business, not only to proclaim this truth, but to demonstrate it and embody it. We are here to say "If anyone is in Christ he/she is a new creature and there is a new creation". We are here to become the agents of God's redemptive power and activity in the world.

Lets become what we are!