

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 4 Year A 2023

A favorite assertion made by many atheists and secularists is that we do not need religion for a humane, ethical life. The ethical life, they argue, is innate. We do not need an external belief system, or institutions, telling us how to be good, moral, and kind. And we certainly do not need religion. It's an attractive idea and one many people subscribe to. It provides an excuse for why religious belief practice can be dispensed with. Because, they argue, we don't really need them. Or even, that we are better off without them because religion, of whatever brand or colour, are damaging and dangerous!

In our cultural context, we are often faced with the question, 'well what has Christianity ever done for us?' Tom Holland - English author and historian - has done so much in recent years to highlight what Christianity *has* done, not only for western civilization, but for humanity in general. In his weighty volume 'Dominion,' Holland has drawn attention to what the church has *positively* contributed to our world, and challenged some of the bold assertions that we are better off without Christian faith. *What has the church ever done for us?* Well, it turns out, a great deal indeed.

Now, sermons that are a thinly veiled book review are pretty tedious indeed, so I will not attempt that here. Except to draw you to a key point Holland makes. *Repeatedly*, He says, *like a great earthquake, Christianity has sent reverberations around the world... That human beings have rights: that they are born equal. These were never self-evident truths.* As faithful followers of the Lord Christ, we should have *confidence* that our faith has been - and is - a positive good for individuals and for our world. Without a doubt, the experience of the vast majority of humankind throughout history has been pretty miserable. Most people, according to C17th philosopher Hobbes, lived lives that were 'poor, nasty, brutish and short.' But it was the Christian revolution - on its Jewish foundation - that almost single-handedly improved the lot of humanity.

Consider some key ideas that remain at the centre of Western life and thought. The very idea of human rights, of the equal dignity of every person, of the value of the poor and weak, and the necessity of caring and advocating for them all. The idea that love is the greatest value and that we should forgive those who wrong us. Even in our world today, we still find people who want to hold onto the idea that there are moral absolutes - that some things are good and some things are evil- and particularly that oppression of the powerless is wrong.

But all these ideas were unique to Christianity! They did not develop in Eastern cultures. The Greeks and the Romans found them laughable and incomprehensible when they first heard them. The shame-and-honour cultures of old, pagan Europe - of the Anglo-Saxons, the Franks, and the Germans - thought that the Christian ethic of forgiving one's enemies and of honouring the poor and weak was completely unworkable as a basis for society. These ideas would've never occurred to anyone unless they held to a universe with a single, personal God who created all people in his image, and with a Saviour who came and died in sacrificial love. The ideas only could've grown from such a worldview. They don't make sense in a different one! If, instead, we believe we're here by accident through a process of survival of the fittest, then there can be no moral absolutes, and life must be, if anything, about power and the mastery of others, not about love. That is the only way to live once you are truly willing to admit that the Christian God does not exist.

The idea of universal human rights and the equality of every individual was developed not by the philosophes of the Enlightenment but by Christian canon lawyers in the 12th century, based on Genesis and our creation in God's image. The idea that every person has a right to his or her own body, and that therefore sex must be completely consensual, was a startling new concept that came into the world through Christianity. The last pagan emperor of Rome, Julian, sought to revive paganism in the face of Christianity's growth. But pagans despised the poor and weak, while Christians poured themselves out for the sick, orphans, the poor, and for abandoned infants. And so, the masses turned to Christ. Such charity to the needy was unique to Christian faith.

It was lived reflection on the person of Jesus Christ that turned the ancient world upside down, and can continue to turn our world upside down. The reversal of values is of course what lay at the heart of the sublime passage from Matthew's gospel we have heard proclaimed today. These opening verses of the famous Sermon on the Mount are surely the pinnacle of Christ's ethical teaching. And there we see so perfectly expressed this very idea of Christ powerfully reorienting our moral framework. If we seek to remove faith, indeed Christ, from our ethical and moral lives, well the alternative is pretty grim. What is innate, what is part of universal human character, *is not* charity, mercy, forgiveness, humility, but greed and self-assertion and retaliation! The long history of humankind simply highlights how misguided and mistaken is the idea that we are innately good.

What is instinctual is to say, 'Blessed are the rich, for they can have anything they want.' And, 'Blessed are those who live it up!' What is instinctual is to say, 'Blessed are the strong and tough, who push through and seek to make the self 'number one.' And, 'Blessed are those who hunger for power and status and fame'. What is instinctual is to say, 'Blessed are those who show no mercy and take no prisoners.' And, 'Blessed are those who look the part and carry themselves convincingly'. What is instinctual is to say, 'Blessed are the trouble makers and warmongers.' And, 'Blessed are those who cheat and get away with it,' or 'those who stand by their own truth.'

It is plain to see that the attitudes and situations Jesus commends are not in themselves a recipe for getting on in the world! Because these beatitudes all centre around the idea of living in a non-competitive, non-grasping way. To be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be gentle and unselfish rather than insist on your own priority, to have a passionate commitment to justice, to exercise mercy instead of taking advantage, to be pure in heart, to be peacemakers, to endure persecution for what is right and for allegiance to Christ, well, all these things make one vulnerable, here and now.

Yet Christ declares these very situations, or these very dispositions, as sources of blessing, as deserving of blessedness. And to live according to these values only makes sense if God truly is as Jesus reveals God to be. In the present, yes, it will involve vulnerability and loss. But in the light of Jesus' promise of the kingdom, it is complete common sense. The mercy, comfort, and satisfaction, and the rest, that come by trusting the promise are the rewards, the blessings of the kingdom.

This is where the atheists and secularists all get stuck! They can only operate on a horizon of the here and now. But Christ provides a framework *not* dependent on the here and now. He frees us from worldly expectations and worldly ambitions. And in freeing us from these earthly, temporal frameworks – what is truly innate – then they can be dispensed with. They have no power over us. And because our value and meaning don't come from them, they can be transformed into something else. This 'something else' is one of the church's greatest legacies. The usual way of operating as human beings have never got us very far and left most of us pretty miserable. But Christ proposes another way. A way that was strange when it first appeared, and strange now. Indeed, stranger now than ever. But it is not a way to simply make the world a nicer place. It is a way that draws us to the very heart of God. Amen.