



THE
MERCERS'
COMPANY

The Advent Sermon

13th December 2023

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In recent times when we have witnessed such lack of honesty and integrity in public life, when there seems to be such abundant wealth for the few at the expense of the common good, I thought I would attempt to say something about Christian values in our everyday life. For our society has indeed been shaped by Christian belief, practice and values, even if now we live in a much more pluralistic and multifaith society.

Christian values and Christian morality are not primarily about obeying a set of rules given us by God. If they were, then people could (as many of them do) accept the rules and leave out God. Of course, rules are important. We need them for everyday living. But for the Christian they are not primary. The first and most basic command given by Jesus was, 'Follow me'. The heart of Christian morality is to know God and be known by God, and so to see all other relationships in that light. To leave out God is to leave out what matters most.

Because of our unfamiliarity with the thought forms of Hebrew culture, one could be forgiven for thinking, that in the Bible Old Testament morality and behaviour were entirely guided by the negative moral injunction "Thou shalt not..." with its concomitant understanding "For if you do, then disaster, evil, calamity etc will befall you". God can and has been perceived as a stern, moralistic, rather heavy-handed Victorian disciplinarian, who delights in visiting his wrath upon those miscreants who disobey him. If we do think like that then we have missed the essential point about Jewish and indeed Christian moral values. They are rooted in relationship with God. This God is one who reveals his love for his creation by entering into dialogue and inviting a response. I shall return to this theme in a moment.

But I want us to consider how we learn about right and wrong. Very often as a parish priest I used to interview couples with little close attachment to the Church and ask them why they had asked for their child to be baptized. They would often answer along the lines of wanting the child to grow up with a sense of understanding the difference between right and wrong, and that getting the baby christened seemed a good way to start. There is truth here, of course, although I would try to help them understand that baptism was not a shot of moral adrenaline that would guarantee their child's future good behaviour. We would then turn to explore the promises of Baptism and the responsibilities of parents and Godparents in the context of our relationship with God. But the parents were right in seeing the context of the Christian faith as one which is concerned with right living.

So how do we learn about right and wrong? Well, it is certainly not by learning a rote list of right and wrong things to do. Merely learning the Ten Commandments by heart, without some explanation and application, is probably less useful than learning your Ten Times Table. What it is about is learning to become a morally responsible person; and this happens in a multitude of ways. What is experienced or observed in the playground is as important, perhaps more important in some respect, than what is said in the classroom. A school where bullying is commonplace and discipline slack teaches lessons about unfairness, and children experiencing this may store up hidden anger, which can erupt in later life as a contempt for social order. In a home where the relationship between parents is unpredictable and the house rules arbitrarily applied and punishments meted out inconsistently, this will likely produce similar effects. Widening the net, lessons need to be drawn from our society where success often seems to belong to bullies of a different order, or to those whose way of life and actions are morally dubious.

My point is an obvious one. Our personalities are formed and morality and values learnt, for the most part, by unconscious absorption of values and attitudes from our surroundings. There is a place for rules to provide some sort of base line. There is a place for stories and parables, even if it is the television soap operas which are the modern hyped-up versions of morality tales subtly conveying their own standards. Learning about right and wrong is a complex and lifelong operation. The mass of experiences, impressions and influences need sifting through and welding together into some coherent whole. We need a world view, a way of looking at ourselves in relation to others. This is where morality has usually been linked with religion.

Very often this link has been expressed in terms of commands issued by divine authority. We refrain from some action because God says it is wrong or perhaps less attractively because we fear being found out. This can help us set up some inner defences and help nurture strength of character. But defences built because of fear of divine retribution, while seeming to solve some behavioural problems, may do so at the cost of stirring up inner resentment or by feeding subservience. Jesus in his teaching was at pains to point out that it was the motivation for actions that were at the root of the problem, so that a lustful eye, a nursed anger, a vindictive temper were the issues that needed dealing with. Consistency in and constancy of life are required. Christians recognize in God the quality of steadfastness, faithfulness and mercy. God is our rock on whom we can rely and whose steadfastness we try to reflect in our own relationship with one another. So God comes first. God sets the pattern. It is in the light of God's self-revelation in Christ that we try to live.

Here we must be careful. Like the faithful Jew, Christians can delight in the Law of the Lord, in the revelation of God in Scripture. We can seek to love God in his word. But we must beware of confusing love of God and love of the Bible, especially when that leads to a slavishly narrow, literalistic approach to the Scriptures. The Bible may give us access to God, but it is God we must love and relate to.

Following Jesus, I said earlier, is a primary call for the Christian in terms of obedience and values. Yet even an over intense concern with the person of Jesus may lead us also into tricky, even absurd situations. The “What Would Jesus Do?” movement in the USA amongst young people which came to prominence a few years ago, whilst appearing admirable in terms of facing contemporary problems, can seem rather disconnected. John Habgood, a former Archbishop of York, once said, “When pious people ask such questions as, ‘What would Jesus have done about the privatisation of British Rail?’ I am strongly tempted to answer, ‘He would have walked’”.

The New Testament does not set out the story of Jesus as a Highway Code book of solutions to all problems for all time. It presents Jesus as God’s ultimate conversation with the human race and invites a response. Trying to live out Christian faith and values is our way of showing our love for God, which is a response to the love of God who pours himself out in a human life and a human death, the God who comes to us in sacrificial love. It is by being loved that we are enabled to love: “We love him because he first loved us,” says the First Letter of John. And so the command to love (the first and second Greatest Commandments) becomes a human possibility through the gracious action of God which enables a fulfilment.

Living the Christian life is a life of worship of God in heart and soul and mind and strength and, I would venture to add, with imagination. We know something of his love for us: we know enough of his love for us. That is what lies at the heart of the Christmas Story of which we shall soon be reminded. It is this God, both known and unknown, whom we worship, and should be seeking to hear and to serve and to love. It is this God, who pours such love upon us, who is eager to receive our response, in the offering of our whole selves to him.