

Dear Brothers

During my pilgrimage 'down under' I was invited to give a series of six talks to the clergy of the diocese of Wangaratta on the rather challenging theme of 'Anglican and Catholic in conversation with....' Perhaps the most stretching from my point of view was the last, '...in conversation with the world'. In practice, it is not only a matter of distilling the content of what we Catholics take with us into such a conversation, but the very difficulty of our being listened to or heard.

Even if the British Prime Minister has so recently called the Church to play its part in rebuilding the crumbling moral life of what he calls this 'Christian country', we know over recent months for example that Archbishop Rowan's editorship of an edition of the New Statesman and the bishops entering the public arena about the political and economic scene have met with mixed reactions. Not simply with regard to the content, disagreement about which can be good and healthy, but to the appropriateness of their attempts to speak to an audience beyond the Christian community.

### **Heretic or lunatic?**

Words written as far back as 1934 by the lucid and entertaining lay Anglo Catholic Christian socialist Maurice Reckitt seem worth restating even today:

*'If you had told any typical Christian thinker in any century from the twelfth to the sixteenth that religion had nothing to do with economics, and that bishops must not intrude in these matters upon the deliberations of laymen – propositions which to many of the correspondents to our newspapers appear to be axiomatic – he would either have trembled for your faith or feared for your reason. He would have regarded you, in short, as either a heretic or lunatic.'*

Still more is there criticism if they stray into questions of personal morality and the ordering of what society currently regards as legitimate for the individual to decide. While shaving recently, I listened to a Radio 4 panel called together following the November letter by the eighteen bishops that criticised the government's proposed welfare changes. Their intervention on that matter was deemed entirely appropriate by one commentator (he agreed with them), but he then went on in the next breath to say how unchristian and cruel it was for the same bishops to refuse the solemnisation of civil partnerships in churches, if that's what people wanted.

On a more trivial level, I was reminded of how difficult it is to speak of the things that matter to us, when I found myself in a crowded Melbourne street on the day a large department store unveiled, as it does every year, its Christmas window displays. Each year a million people come to see them. They did not disappoint! In five windows based on 'Santa Claus is coming to town', the technical knowhow of the world's illusion makers brought the carol to life in a mesmerising, toe-tapping animation. Elves beavered away; reindeers galloped; a spaceship launched to take Santa to his galactic children, and the real showstopper, eighteen smiling kids from all over the world, including Africa and the Middle East, gleefully united around a present-laden tree. It was alive with manufactured joy and manufactured optimism!

But there was a sixth window too, tucked away at the end, drawing little or no attention. Nothing moved or revolved or danced or smiled or sang or seemed to breathe; just a man and a woman attending to their child. It seemed like a lifeless afterthought for those who prefer the old world fantasies to the new.

## **The overweight usurper**

What was really irritating was that everybody around me seemed so happy, and indeed to the naked eye, the big five did *seem* more alive, more interesting, more attractive! Adding insult to injury, in a pair of weird Advent reversals the said carol blasted forth, bidding us to sleep rather than wake, and according to its lyrics even one of the Four Last Things, the right to judge whether I'd been bad or good seemed to have passed into Santa's hands...

Now I'm not one of those puritans who would cancel Christmas for the sake of a little excess, but I was taken aback by the way my heart was temporarily crushed by the evident skew wiff-ness of it all; the relegating of our God to the sixth window; the perverse idea that a tree laden with presents could somehow unite this divided and unequal world and by the seemingly impossible evangelistic task to which I, to which we, are committed.

Wisely, I took refuge in a nearby church, where the Sacrament is exposed, and for a few minutes sought the protection I sorely needed in company with a smaller, yet not insignificant crowd.

Following this experience I was initially rather impressed to read of a group of French priests who on Christmas Eve 1951 lined up 250 unsuspecting children outside the Cathedral at Dijon to witness the hanging, and the burning (starting with the beard!) of Father Christmas so fed up were they with the overweight usurper! Perhaps not the best way to carry on a conversation with the world. The next day, the local town hall staged his resurrection and a triumphant Santa addressed the reassembled, jubilant children. The scenario reminded me of how often things I have said in 'conversation' have been more designed to give *me* satisfaction than to open and extend the dialogue!

## **Open hearted but not empty handed**

Well enough of all that! What is it that we Catholic Anglicans take with us into conversation with the world, for if we go with open hearts, as indeed we must, we dare not go empty handed. To do so would not only be unfaithful, but leave us spiritually defenceless and evangelistically neutered.

Two doctrines. First, the overarching truth of the sovereignty of God. Any ownership I have of anything or power over anyone is temporary and delegated, for all are absolutely and primarily the possessions of God, the creator and preserver of all things. This I hold even in the moments of ambiguity when it seems the sovereign God has chosen to be silent or inactive, and it gives me the clue to how I am to regard material things and how I am to regard myself in my being and in my doing.

Though heaven and earth will indeed pass away, we reverence and delight in material things because they are charged with the 'shook foil' of God's glory. We ask the sovereign God to teach us, 'in all things Thee to see' so we will not be blinded to what might be termed their sacramentality. However, quite literally not the 'be all and end all', too much must not be asked of material things or invested in them. With a realism about their temporal fragility, we acknowledge an essential unity in the diversity of the created order because all owe their existence to the generosity of the one God. Because of God's sovereignty, nothing is to be regarded as intrinsically 'secular', (even the devil is a fallen *angel*!) and there can be no human activity, economic, political, educational, leisure and so on which is outside the 'religious' sphere. This may seem blatantly obvious, but a historical survey of the wrongheaded use of the text, *Render to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God* to justify their detachment will prove otherwise!

Secularity, which Alexander Solzhenitsyn through bitter experience said leads to a *'world split apart'* is regarded by us as a human invention, and entirely not the liberation that the secular humanist claims it to be. It's not a particularly new approach. This freeing things up from God is well described in the Book of Genesis when our first parents consciously decided not to look at the apple or what they did with it in terms of the Creator or his will.

### **Made for a supernatural destiny**

Talk of our first parents leads to the second doctrine, our doctrine of Man. We believe a person to be a being of body and soul created by God, having a permanent individuality and made for a supernatural destiny. Possessing intellect and will, each is responsible for his or her conduct and is a social being of intrinsic worth and dignity, with both individual and social needs, rights and responsibilities.

This doesn't say everything about us of course, for it says nothing direct about important realities like sin, redemption, the Incarnation and the Resurrection, the Church and the Sacraments, central to our life now and with our reaching of that destiny.

But it does seem to me that these two doctrines are the properly non-negotiable truths we hold as we manage our own lives, and in our dealings with others. However ridiculous some may suppose them to be, as we play our part in the debate on how the *polis*, the community, the social order is to be constructed they are our wisdom and armour. And I should begin with these doctrines in the discerning of what political party or economic or social policy to support, even if it leads to decisions that may be to my personal disadvantage.

The calculated to make my blood boil social commentator Matthew Parris wrote in the Times following Mr Cameron's recent speech that he was wise indeed not to tell his audience whether he actually believed the doctrines from which the Christian moral tradition flows.

But can that tradition really stand, really illicit the inevitable sacrifices called for if it is separated from the given-ness of its divine provenance? Can it for example have the moral force clearly required to re-orientate a financial system from one whose purpose seems to have become the production of financial profit for individuals and groups, to one that best builds and supports a fair and just society which respects the safety and welfare of human beings and conserves finite world resources? And what about the duty in that tradition to speak of the dangers to the individual soul of those who accumulate and manipulate wealth for themselves blind to its implications on the poor or even just the middle classes! Can I indeed live the moral life without God's help? Dare we call others to that life knowing our own failures to practise what we preach? Does taking leave of the doctrines of God and Man lead in the end to a take it or leave it approach to the moral tradition flowing from them?

### **The motivating doctrine**

Of course, these doctrines and the developing moral tradition themselves owe much in their interpretation to our understanding of God as Trinity, and of the 'leaping down from the royal throne' of the Second Person who has literally become human. The implications of this are so magnificent and profound that we priests must surely stand with our bonfiring brothers in Dijon at least to the extent of being disturbed by the distractions that surround so great a Feast. The Incarnation has always been the key motivating doctrine of authentic Catholic Anglicanism. It is the Incarnation that makes talk of the Fatherhood of God more than an abstract theological idea. It becomes a concrete reality because he has a coeternal Son, whom we have *'heard and seen and*

*touched*. (1John1) It teaches us that at the heart of things the principle of power is subordinated to the principle of communion.

Thomas Hancock, one of the early members of the St Matthew Guild, a Christian Socialist group unafraid to enter the political fray which included in its membership heroes like Headlam, Dolling and Frank Weston, speaks of a wonderful implication of the Incarnation with an admirable succinctness, when he says, *'We do not have to persuade God to be humane, for he is human!'*

It is sometimes said that by the Incarnation the visible and the unseen world were joined together for a season, as a sort of passing episode. But this is to misunderstand, placing the participation of God in our life in the past and putting us in danger of losing its contemporary implications.

Let me quote Eric Mascall OGS, one of the great minds of our Movement:

*'It is a sheer mistake to suppose that the Ascension meant that the Incarnation was over, that Jesus having done his job was leaving this world and going back to the heaven from which he had come. The precise opposite is the case: the Ascension was the final liberation of Jesus's human nature from the restraints of space and time, so that henceforth he could, through the descent of the Holy Spirit, be present in that human nature in all times and places.'*

Jesus unites himself with me personally, and he unites the human race in its entirety to himself. His life and ours are joined. His wounds and ours commingle. His alone are truly redemptive, and give us the measure of how we deal with one another's lives and sins and woundedness. All are made to enjoy in Christ nothing less than the life of God himself. This is our joy, our glory and our hope and must never be our embarrassment! We must of course join with others who work for the common good, of whatever creed or none. But with love we must tell them of the divine purpose for which they were made, and invite them to that belief. And to use some words of a much maligned hymn, we must 'build Jerusalem' here so that there is indeed an obvious similarity between the tent in which we now dwell, and the building we are yet to inhabit. (2Cor5) Looking for him now in the faces of our brethren and serving him especially as he is manifested in the weak and vulnerable, we must love him now in all people without exception.

Thank God for the many who, despite the shallow distractions, and perhaps even seeking relief from them, flock to our Crib Services each year. But I suspect many see the safe delivery of Jesus in the comparative warmth of the stable as a sort of happy ending after a precarious journey. In truth we know it is only the beginning! I could kick myself for the missed opportunities when folk came to my parish for such things. Never did I prepare some simple literature to give them to take them beyond that happy ending; never did I offer them an Alpha or even a Credo course in January; never do I remember inviting them to bring their kids to Sunday school! I didn't see Advent time as Mission time, and I am sorry for it. I just moped around in disappointment that none came back in January!

*'It takes a saint's heart to understand the meaning of Christmas'* says the Capuchin, Raniero Cantalamessa, but the far reaching implications of this doctrine are of such import for our lives and for the shaping of our life together, that though I be on the foothills of that understanding I must devote my best powers and first love to the endeavour and make it the heart of my conversation with the world.

+Lindsay OGS