

Corona Season (7.2.21)

2 Before Lent

A MORAL SOCIETY

Lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight.

PROVERBS 9.6

It is a pity that the wisdom literature of the Bible – Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs – is more or less unknown as it presents a contrasting view to other the books of Old Testament. You will not find in the wisdom writings stories of battles, the doings of kings, or the warnings of the prophets. Wisdom is not concerned with actual events, but with the insight and discernment that enables those events to be evaluated and put in context. Wisdom affirms that there is a divinely sustained cosmic order behind the events of human experience, and its purpose is to help us to live through them; it gives us something enduring to hold on to.

We stand in sore need of wisdom today, as is evident from the main stories in the news, from the serious inequalities revealed by the Covid pandemic to the polarisation of politics, especially in the USA, to the Dasgupta Review published this week that lays bare the inadequacy of economic ideas in the face of climate change. Add to that programmes like *Love Island* and *Married at First Sight*, and the picture of a disordered world, of moral confusion is plain to see.

In many of our moral dilemmas we are the victims of our own cleverness. The increase in knowledge in modern times is phenomenal but it has occurred at precisely the time when we have

lost the shared moral sense which allows us to evaluate it and use it aright. E.F. Schumacher, put the point well; in *Small is Beautiful* he said, 'we have become too clever to be able to live without wisdom.' We prize cleverness when what we need is wisdom; we look for information when what we need is insight.

The problem has been compounded by the Internet. It has brought about an undreamed-of access to information – so much so that we are overwhelmed with information and choice – but it offers no guidance on how to discriminate between the good and the bad, the useful and the destructive. It is all about information; it offers next to nothing about insight. It is not surprising that the Internet has been described as both anarchic and subversive.

The former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (who sadly died last year) in *The Politics of Hope* addressed the problem of the loss of a shared moral sense and how it how it might be regained. Sacks argues that we need to learn again the skill of moral argument in public, and to recover the will to place constraints on what we can do but which in the long run will not be to the common good. The environment is an obvious example. Exploiting it brings immediate economic benefits, but only at the expense of the survival of the planet. To lay aside immaturity and walk in the way of insight we need to re-build a moral society.

A moral society can only be built from within. Today, by contrast we tend to rely on external controls. Whenever something goes wrong we set up a procedure or a system to ensure that it will never happen again. Such systems have their place, but they are not a

lasting solution. What is really needed is the strengthening of internal controls; if those who operate the system have an inadequate moral sense, it won't achieve its object. Controlling the Internet is a good example. It is virtually impossible to police; if there are to be effective controls over it use they will have to come from within, from a shared sense of what is morally acceptable, as with the decision of Twitter to close Donald Trump's account.

The problem is not new. Norman Davies in his *History of Europe* describes the decline of the Roman Empire, a process of inner decay, of moral laziness and corruption. It was a long process stretching over many centuries, and those who lived through it would have been unaware that it was happening. The parallel with today is clear. Jonathan Sacks shows how the present moral laziness began in the seventeenth century; over the years most people have not been aware of what was happening, and today many rejoice in the absence of moral constraints – a situation powerfully supported by modern economics. The result is that the Christian virtues which have shaped our European society over the centuries are being abandoned in favour of a culture of consumption and individual choice. Morality has been privatised; all moral choices are accepted as equally valid. We have abandoned the wisdom of the ages precisely at the time when we have become too clever to be able to live without it.

It is easy to diagnose the problem; it is less east to say what needs to be done. How do you get wisdom? *Proverbs* describes wisdom in familiar images: 'Wisdom has built her house; she has

hewn her seven pillars... spiced her wine, and spread her table.' A house, a feast, good wine: wisdom, unlike information, cannot be looked up in a book it can only be built like a house, savoured, experienced, tasted like good food and wine. The getting of wisdom takes time and it needs the company of others. Wisdom is communal not individual; it is not a matter of personal choice, a lifestyle option, but something acquired from the society in which we live.

Our problem is not that we lack moral concern – moral concern dominates the news: climate change, environmental pollution, child protection, Third World Debt, GM crops... What we lack is not moral concern but moral society, the collective sense that unless we place some limits on personal choice, on the way we use our cleverness and our freedom, we shall lose all that we have gained.

Jonathan Sacks argues convincingly for the re-building of a moral society. He believes we have the resources, and that we have done it before in the fight against slave trade and against the exploitation of children following the industrial revolution. What characterised these campaigns was people coming together in local societies and groups, not as vigilantes but as agents of responsible change. The hallmark of a moral society is the willingness of ordinary people to get involved. Programmes like *Love Island* are the sign of a society that has become morally lazy: we are content to be spectators but not to be involved – like Romans at the Games watching the gladiators kill each other. The French call such people *voyeurs* – voyeurism is a sickness of the spirit

The fight against slavery and the exploitation of children was led by Christians like William Wilberforce and Charles Dickens. They formed groups and societies through which they rebuilt the moral society of their day. A similar effort is required today; there are encouraging signs that it is happening, and we Christians have huge resources to bring to such an endeavour. To do it we need to recover our self-confidence and widen our concern from the personal to the communal, from individual salvation to building the Kingdom.

Perhaps the most important resource that we bring to the debate is the conviction that a moral society cannot be built without God: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom is timeless; it is outside of ourselves; it is something given. We believe that Jesus is the wisdom of God personified. We who dwell in his house, who are fed at his banquet, have much to contribute to the rebuilding of a moral society. Can it be done? I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful. Optimism believes that everything will all work out for the best. Hope accepts that it may not, but even so believes that there are possibilities of good worth striving for. Hope is a deep-seated trust that we shall return to our senses; hope believes that our resources are equal to our challenges, and drives the determination to use the one to address the other. But hope has to be enabled. God calls his Church to be the agent of hope. Even now says the Lord, lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight.