

## Downing Place United Reformed Church, Cambridge

Sunday 27 October 2019 : Trinity XIX

Sermon

*Joel 2:23-32, 2 Timothy 4:6-8 and 16-18; Luke 18:9-14*

In 1952, the year of the present Queen's accession, a Commission chaired by Sir Walter Moberly reported to the National Assembly of the Church of England (predecessor of the General Synod). It was one of many twentieth century attempts to analyse the current state of English church-state relations and suggest solutions to a number of recurring institutional controversies. Part of the Report entailed looking at the 'state' side of that relationship, making an assessment of society from a Christian point of view. It is interesting to look back at what was said; in particular, at the striking contrast which the Commission drew in that respect between the United Kingdom and the Continent. It was the year after the Treaty of Paris, in which the European Communities had been founded by six Continental nations who felt the Council of Europe did not go far enough.

'Christendom', said the Commission, 'is no longer a natural description of European civilisation'. With memories of the Axis powers still strong and the cold war in one of its most dangerous phases, that was not altogether a surprising opinion. But on this side of the Channel, the Report had more positive things to say. It found English public opinion 'accessible to appeals to Christian sentiment and to Christian standards'. It saw in official ceremonial, from assize sermons to the coronation, the nation's confession that public affairs remained 'all ultimately subject to the will and judgment of God'. The requirements for religious instruction and daily worship which had recently been imposed on state-maintained schools reflected 'a widespread desire that children should be brought up to be godfearing men and women'. And looking at the welfare state, the Commission concluded that 'In some respects the nation is more, rather than less Christian than it was. The profession of Christianity may be less general, but not so its practice if we judge by fruits, as we are authoritatively enjoined to do.'

Hearing this, we may well be tempted to launch into a comparison of then and now, asking how far English society seventy years later lives up to the Moberly Commission's hopes. I want, however, to avoid that temptation today. Rather, what interests me now is the Commission's Anglo-European contrast and the spirit in which it was made.

By 1952 the story of the Third German *Reich* had become fairly well-known in Britain; probably better known than it had been before the War, when not everybody found it interesting, or during the War when direct sources of information were blocked off. This history included for Christians, amongst other aspects, the story of the co-called 'Church struggle' or *Kirchenkampf* within German protestantism, resisting the attempt of the National Socialist government to align organised religion with the party programme. So 1950s critics of the role played by Parliament and government in the life of England's religious Establishment – not least, of course, the predecessors of our own denomination – pointed to this as a danger. They argued it was unsafe to assume that 'it could never happen here'. The Moberly Report summed up their attitude as a view that 'Unconditional loyalty to [Christ] leaves room only for a conditional loyalty to any other authority' – pretty much summing up the thrust of the Barmen Theological Declaration, adopted in 1934 as a key position statement of the stubborn German minority known as the confessing church.

However, against such an application of the German lesson to England, Moberly set the argument that British government works differently. 'It is our national habit to rely upon convention rather than on formal law. ... Our political constitution is unwritten and depends on a loose body of tacit understandings. The British nation could not conduct its affairs without disaster, nor the Commonwealth hold together, unless parliament were in the habit of recognising that it is not morally competent to do all sorts of things that it is legally empowered to do.' Accordingly, the Commission reasoned, cutting the parliamentary link or ending the role of the Prime Minister in church appointments were not high priorities for the Church of England. These quintessentially British institutions could be trusted not to abuse their constitutional power – trusted further, in fact, than the corresponding institutions of those Continental countries with written constitutions, who would regularly go as far as the letter of such constitutions allowed.

Enough history. In this 1952 setting, we have seen a group of English churchpeople drawing contrasts with recent Continental experience. Reading between the lines, we can imagine them saying 'We do

not persecute religious groups as Stalin is currently doing. Our government does not seek to dominate them as Hitler did. The fact that our political institutions would never do what is “just not done” means we need not fear the theoretical power of government over England’s official religion ever being abused. Nor have we systematically severed religion from public life, as have the godless French. We have social provision that expresses Christian values (even if unwittingly), ceremonial that professes a common Christian belief, and schools that will seek to nurture a new Christian generation.’

Does this begin to ring any bells? How close is that attitude to ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people’? The Pharisee depicted on the front cover of today’s order of service appears well-fed (what tactful people might call ‘prosperous’) and neatly-dressed, suggesting a higher socio-economic status than the kneeling tax collector. But that is not really the point of the parable we have just heard. What characterised Jesus’ Pharisee was not financial but spiritual superiority. He thanked God not for wealth but for being *better* than his neighbour. Albeit with worthy motives, does it not sound as though the Moberly Commission came close to suggesting England remained collectively one-up in spiritual terms, closer to that ideal of Christendom which it believed was no longer to be found across the Channel?

And perhaps they were right. Certainly on their face the institutions of postwar England suggested a closer societal commitment to Christianity than those in many European states. And if the revolutions in Catholic countries like Spain and Ireland had given a dominant role to religion, that was to institutions of the Roman Church rather than of the nations themselves. In the same way, what the Pharisee said in his prayer may have been perfectly true. There were all sorts of possible charges, from theft to adultery, that could not be laid against him. He kept his distance from the Roman authorities, whilst the tax-collector worked for them. He gave to others; the tax-collector exploited others.

But there are times when truth is not a sufficient defence. In Jesus’ story we hear no suggestion that the Pharisee was lying or mistaken. His attitude was less likely to result in justification, that is to put him in a right relationship with God, not because his claims were false, but because he believed it sufficient to recite his history of compliance with the law. He did not recognise that he still needed divine aid. He needed it, no doubt, in many respects which were glossed over in his catalogue of virtues; but he needed it also to keep him in the right paths in which he was already walking. It is not for nothing that public promises of future behaviour often end with the words ‘So help me God’.

The story of the Moberly Commission is separated from us both by time – the length of a very long reign – and by the fact that it concerned a religious establishment to which our Congregational, Presbyterian and Church of Christ predecessors did not conform. We are part of a very different nation in many ways, and anyhow not subject to the structures of religious government Moberly was examining. Can we, then, feel free to criticise that Report’s authors with impunity? ‘We thank you, Lord, that we are not like the Moberly Commission. We belong to a Free Church with a government distinct from that of the nation. We have learned all the lessons of totalitarianism, even in the religious field. We see the good in our Continental neighbours and have (up to now) co-operated closely with them. We know even long-respected conventions are not unbreakable in the world of politics. We realise legal requirements on schools will not, by themselves, produce new Christian generations.’

Again, maybe all these things are true. But of course that way of putting it would reek of just the same smugness against which our Gospel warns. It is, I should say, a smugness to which I am particularly prone. But in my better moments I recognise one can criticise in constructive rather than disparaging ways. One can set an example of humility alongside one of right conduct. One can admit oneself to be fallible, stand alongside a fellow-human being, and emphasise what one has in common with that person rather than what sets one apart.

We live in a society where people are encouraged to blow their own trumpets – to ‘pitch’ for financial backing, to ‘know their strengths’, to ‘sell themselves’. From personal statements on applications to university to company reports and party manifestoes, we stress our own good points. Often honestly, maybe also with gratitude. Sometimes also we draw justified comparisons. But we should never stop there. As individuals, as a church, as a society, we need to recognise our need of God, and that this need remains just as great, whatever progress we may make. For at the end of the day that progress is simply a drop in the ocean, compared to the vast reservoir of God’s grace offered us with no condition save free acceptance. And we recall what we learn from Joel, that God is able to put right, in his own way, disasters which nobody else can. So it does no harm to follow the example of conscientious

discipleship found in the Pharisee; but when it comes to assessing where we stand before God we do well to rank ourselves alongside the tax-collector, repeating with him 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'. Amen.

C.C. Augur Pearce  
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