

## NOT AGAIN!

*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him,  
a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining  
the word of truth.*

2 Timothy 2.15

People are not much concerned these days to present themselves to God as one approved by him. Indeed, I wonder sometimes how many Christians would describe the goal of their life in this way – wanting to stand before God with no need to be ashamed, grounded in his truth. If we don't strive to present ourselves to God as one approved by him, then we lose touch with him, and we lose touch with his truth, that is, with any sense of an ultimate standard by which we shall be approved or not. It seems to me that this is a big part of the reason why we seem to be in so much of a mess today.

As you watch or listen to the news, how often do you hear yourself saying, 'Not again!' as we're told about another child who has been cruelly abused or neglected, or another instance of a failure in healthcare or some other public service, or another scandalous business malpractice, or another atrocity committed by religious fanatics ... 'Oh! no. Not again!' The news presents us with a picture of a disordered world, where few seek to stand before God without shame, and where there are no common standards of conduct.

In many ways 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 want 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; there's not much about insight.

A few years ago I read *The Politics of Hope* by Jonathan Sacks, then the Chief Rabbi, in which addresses the problem of the loss of a shared moral sense and considers 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 stand in the presence of God without shame 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 moral controls. In the banking crisis we are told that the controls were adequate; it is those who operated them who were not. The same is true in child abuse, health care, and business.

When something goes wrong, the response is to tighten up the controls, put new procedures in place, so whatever has happened will never happen again. But it does, and again the cry resounds: 'Oh! No. Not Again!' It seems to me that the need is not so much for

better systems as for better people. We're now trying to regulate the Press. I don't think it matters whether we have a statutory system or a Royal Charter, or something dreamt up by the Press barons themselves; so long as the same people are operating the system it won't really improve. The only controls that work are within; the problem is in the heart, not in the system.

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. Its the same today. Jonathan Sacks shows how the present moral laziness began in the seventeenth century; a slow decline over the centuries, so slow that most people have not been aware of what was happening, and so today we have reached the point that the absence of moral restraints seems normal. Many rejoice that it is so, insisting on the right to be whatever they choose to be and pursuing whatever good they define for themselves. There must be no normative goals, standards or ideals. The result is that the Christian virtues which have shaped our European society over the centuries have been abandoned in favour of a culture of consumption and individual choice. Morality has been privatised, and 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. And whatever we do there's no quick fix. 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 by common endeavour. Our problem is not that we lack moral concern – moral concern dominates the news ... 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, we shall lose all that we have gained.

There is a sign of hope: we're beginning to hear more about virtue. The banking crisis has brought a call for a more virtuous approach to commercial and political leadership. When the banking crisis erupted, Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, called for the four so-called Cardinal Virtues to be incorporated into public life. They are *Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude* and *Justice*. He summarised them neatly: *Prudence is good judgement; Temperance is emotional intelligence ... understanding our desires and bringing them into self-critical awareness; Fortitude is courage ... without being deflected by circumstance; and Justice is doing what is due to the individual, society and the environment.*

Incorporating virtue into our everyday lives is necessary if we want to stand before God as one approved by him and without shame. Part of the tragedy of the Church today is that it has not stressed how central this is to the Christian life, and has not taught people how to do this. I don't mean teaching morality, rather teaching the spiritual habits and practices that help us to grow inwardly: simple things like contemplative prayer, and the meditative reading of the Bible so that we absorb its truths, and teaching us how to introduce into our everyday conversations a timely word about the cardinal virtues, *Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude* and *Justice*. Because in these everyday encounters – at

home, at work, in the gym and the sports club, on the train and the bus, or in the supermarket queue ... that's where we can do our bit to reverse the moral decline. Wherever we are, we bring to the debate the conviction that a moral society cannot be built without God: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Can it be done? I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful. Hope affirms that even when things are going the wrong way, there are possibilities of good worth striving for. Hope affirms that our resources are equal to our challenges, and the motivates the determination to use the one to address the other. So may we do our best to present ourselves to God as one approved by him, workers who have no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Amen.