

## Isolation Radio Talk

### Jesus said much about ruthless greed and very little about sex

Good Morning

I read somewhere of a person, with some of the melancholy of old age, say that, as 'a nation we are afflicted with conceit - showing off our past, like our cathedrals and churches, without cherishing the qualities that produced them. We are afflicted by sourness in our confrontations and quarrels; with our timidity about the future'.

Conceit, sourness, timidity, that is a real gauntlet thrown down for Christians who follow that 'better and more excellent way' as St Paul talks about in his first letter to the Christian community living in the city of Corinth (1 Corinthians 13). But apparently not! So much you might hear or read in sermon, debate, or reporting of church matters, feels like nothing so much as any other heated chat show. It seems likely to continue if you limit yourselves to what St Paul would call the unspiritual; so long as you think and speak like anyone else, without the transforming and great simplicities that are at the very heart of the Gospel. St Paul again, 'To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace' (Romans 8.6). In other words *life* and *peace* can only come with concern for the spiritual'. I wonder whether you have ever thought of life and peace in this way? Whether you have or not, let me share some thoughts with you to ponder.

'Life' and 'Peace' are not the same as a peaceful life - if only they were. The *peace* of Christ does not remove conflict. With all the power of his thinking and for all his abrupt and direct speaking, St Paul believed it could happen. He looks at fundamentals, to Christ's death; to your baptism into it. Later he writes, 'for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?' (1 Cor 3.3).

The risk of those early clusters of Christians dividing and decaying almost exactly mirror today's experience. They did not even have ancient churches as symbols of tradition. They were held together by the essentials of the Gospel - the fundamentals, to Christ's death. Their mutual love had to depend on that loyalty which overrides the point of conflict. 'And because of the increase of lawlessness,' said Jesus, 'the love of many will grow cold.' The Gospel uses the word 'lawlessness'; a better word might be 'wickedness'. Time and again we have observed some who would destroy a community rather than see it take a direction to which they are opposed. Against that, Christians must show a better way. St Paul did not ask equally divided Christians to surrender their convictions. No, he asked them to accept one another as Christ accepted them.

In our world today the Church can look foolish when it speaks of morality; most often morality is associated with sex. With a wry smile, I draw your attention to the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 5.1-10) where fornication and indecency are not once but twice mentioned; they are listed in a trio that includes 'greed', which makes an idol of gain. I venture the view that greed making an idol of gain is as much an evil of our time as anything else.

Let me be clear. The Christian view down the ages says that sex, separated from its proper context of love, commitment, fidelity, easily becomes debasing and destructive. Promiscuity is not dangerous, it is wrong; for it is grasping for Love in the wrong places and it will never work. So is discrimination wrong, of any kind, discrimination that excludes any from the possibilities of the grace of God, whether it be of nationality or colour; sexuality or lifestyle; it is a flawed way of living life, it does not work.. To draw up rigid lines; to be unwelcoming; to hound from office those who are deemed to have offended, *must* be deeply alien to the character of our Church. For the Church to build in such inflexibility, is to make it a persecuting sect. A poem by Edwin Markham put it this way:

*He drew a circle that shut me out -  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
we drew a circle took him in!*

The assumptions underlying these debates are superficially attractive. The Church needs to have clear standards - I give them to you, and with scriptural warrant. Yes, the Christian needs to be concerned about sexual laxity; all the sexual laxity; it is the confusion of our times; the Christian must give equal concern for the morality of the marketplace; the morality of power and authority, in business as in government.

Turning those high ideals and hopes into practical policies is always an urgent question. For you today, you live in a world convulsed in its understanding of relationships and human responses. That is where the struggle is. It has been the genius of our Church that it constantly tries to uphold high ideals but does not lose sight of reality. In the morality of the Market Square the Church stands firm in its bias towards the poor; in sexual behaviour facts have changed, from the control of its consequences to the deeper understanding of its psychology and meaning; from our understanding of it for procreation, to our understanding of it as a gift from God for the enrichment of life.

St Paul's condemnation looks very different in the light of knowledge of what he was speaking about, not least that he assumed, what we perhaps no longer assume, that homosexuality was simply a matter of irresponsible, deliberate and licentious choice. This is not our understanding today.

Neither Church nor society at large has found it possible to know clear answers to the questions posed. Young people now grow up to know that sex, now, and in previous generations, has frequently been the basis of much hypocrisy. The world offers them endless temptations and opportunities; at the same time, it idolises ruthless greed.

Clear standards help - I have set them out earlier. What seems to be needed is a combination of firmness about what is moral and acceptable for our age; the giving of the whole of yourself in fidelity matched by a gentleness in dealing with the real perplexities that surround it.

We are a disordered society. Human relationships have gone wrong in many ways. Many reinforce the popular image of the Church more concerned with sexual sin than any other form of human failing; that may help those for whom sex is a problem; it does little for the kingdom. It focuses on symptoms not the cause. At root it seems as if our society cares little for the faith that is our inheritance through Christ.

It may also be worth noting that Jesus said much about ruthless greed and very little about sex.

Thank you for listening

## **Prayer**

Let us pray to the one God,  
Mother/Father, Word and Spirit,  
that our lives may bear witness  
to our love and hope in God.

May the love of Christ bring peace and healing.  
May the companion of Christ fill our hearts.  
May the Spirit of Christ lead us in all wisdom  
so that we understand  
that when we grasp for Love in all the wrong places  
in ways that will never work,  
we may learn  
that *forgiving love*  
is only answer,  
is the only hope,  
is the only victory we need  
to sustain our relationships  
with each other  
and with God.  
Amen.