

Waverley Civic Service: June 26th, 2022

Trust in the Lord and be doing good; dwell in the land and be nourished with truth

Psalms 37, 3

I want to commend silence to you...Allow me to explain.

Some years ago, I was a co-opted member of Shropshire County Education Committee, and I was also a co-opted member of Hereford and Worcester County Education Committee. I tell you this to try to establish some degree of credibility and experience in the field of County Council-level politics.

Then, for ten years, I had the privilege of being a member of the House of Lords and amongst other things, served on a Select Committee investigating the subject of Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide, and I was a member of a Pre-legislative Scrutiny Committee looking at changes to legislation around human fertilisation and embryology.

All of those situations, at County and national level, had one thing in common. And it was this. We found that when we were debating the most complex ethical problems, after much careful discussion, there were times when we relapsed into silence. But it was a special kind of silence...one in which we recognised that the ethical complexities we were dealing with were at the very limits of our human understanding.

Let me give an example: in one of the County Education Committees we were debating the closure of a school for blind children. It was an agonising decision. None of us wanted to make it, and yet the financial determinants were clear...the school could not go on; and the educational issues were also clear, we could not provide for the small number of children involved, the quality of education they deserved. We had heard all the arguments in favour of keeping the school open...that, for example, the children would suffer considerable disruption if they were transferred to another school some miles away; we knew that for some families the extra hassle involved would be very demanding; we knew that the current school was excellent in terms of teacher/family relationships...we knew all that, but we had limited room for financial manoeuvre...so, towards the end of the debate, we lapsed into silence, as the Chairman suggested we should. It gave us time to allow our brains and souls and hearts to come to the right decision. And then we voted...

In the House of Lords, it was the same: there were moments in the Euthanasia Select Committee when, after the public had gone, in the Committee room, we sat in silence; again, to give ourselves time to sift through the complexities of the debate and come to a decision. The silence was deep and palpable.

I say all of this in the light of the row that erupted recently about the resignation of Lord Geidt as the Government's Ethics Adviser. I am not going to enter into party political debate about this... but I hope that whatever government is in power, they would not hive off difficult ethical problems to, as it were, an 'outsider' but rather would sit around the Cabinet table and give themselves time to share some silence. Wisdom is not found in loquacious, blustering noise; it is found in and through times of silence...

Now, you might well tell me one of two things: either that at Waverley you also find yourselves in committees where profound silence is sometimes the best and only option, or you might tell me that there is not time for such an indulgence...

So, let me bring to your attention a line from one of the Psalms...these are poems, written over 3000 years ago that have stood the test of time. And the verse I offer you is this: Psalm 37 verse 3:

Trust in the Lord and be doing good; dwell in the land and be nourished with truth

It is that phrase 'be nourished with truth' which I want to explore a little further. I am very aware that politics is a difficult but a very, very important business. I am equally aware that you are frequently called upon to make agonising and finely balanced decisions... and in those cases, what you will be wrestling with is the nature of truth. So, the philosophical question is whether truth is relative, or whether in some sense, it has absolute value.

For me, within the Christian faith I discover truth within the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He becomes, as it were, my yardstick...but that does not make the search for truth, easy. Not at all. Because the Christian faith gives us enough leeway to come to our own decisions, and because of my faith I am aware that discovering truth is a lifetime's occupation...but, and it is a big and unfashionable 'but'...I also recognise that after death I shall have to answer to my Maker for decisions made. It is a sobering thought.

Of course, I recognise that for some of you, what I have just said falls into the category of 'unlikely', and for some, who have no belief in God, all that I have said will be literally non-sense. But suppose just for a moment, that truth, whether it be truth in maths or poetry, science or art, is discoverable...and suppose that truth has a source which is above and beyond our normal human capacities, then might it not make sense to talk of God as the source of truth...that God is the Truth from which all truths derive?

I return to the Psalm---where truth, the Psalmist says, is something by which we are nourished...does not that also make sense? Our understanding of truth takes our entire lives to discover...but it is as we struggle to discover what the truth is in any given situation, that paradoxically, we discover that it is in and through the struggle, that we are nourished...

Which is where I return to the significance of silence, for it is in deep reflection and in quiet thoughtfulness, that we can allow ourselves to be in touch with the truth within us. Now whether you call that inner truth, 'God', or whether you just think of it as an inherent human characteristic, is for you to decide...but what I do know is that without silence and without wisdom, our politics become little more than discordant, brash, and empty noise.

But politics is far too important and too significant for that... perhaps, we need to recognise that whilst politics is about power (and necessarily so), it is also about Truth...and the Truth which nourishes us is only discovered in times of silence...

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.