

St Albans Abbey – Presentation of Christ – 9.30 am /11.15 am – 3.2.13

Malachi 3:5 Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members. – Words attributed to Mahatma Gandhi and repeated by others. *A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.*

In 1790 the decision was made to install the first ever memorial statue in St Paul's Cathedral. The marble statue of a life-sized man wearing a Greek tunic and holding a key and a scroll is not a monarch, or a politician; not even a poet or a person of literature. It is someone who at the time lived just across the lane from where I currently live.

A resident of eighteenth century Cardington – the village just to the south of Bedford that is best known for its vast airship hangers and from where the ill-fated R101 was to leave for its final flight before crashing in France – he lived in the house that now is called Howard House.

The statue is of John Howard, the obsessive and renowned prison reformer, who brought humane

improvement to the prisons of this country and Europe; and who continues to inspire prison reformers today. He was as the nineteenth Dean Milman said in his annals a *pilgrim, not to the gorgeous shrines of saints and martyrs, not even to holy lands, but to the loathsome depths and darkness of the prisons throughout what is called the civilised world.*

John Howard - a Christian man of deep and humble faith, who believed it his duty to do something about the brutality, squalor, corruption and injustice that was the plight of the prisoner.

To be honest he was not an easy man – often self-focused, obsessed, widowed twice, ascetic and often in spiritual turmoil – yet the compassion of God; the love of God worked through him to the benefit of the weakest and to the judgement of their captors.

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The book of Malachi – the messenger – for that is the meaning of the name, stands at the end of our Old Testament Canon. As we heard in our first reading the prophet anticipates the coming of the Lord – at this stage a vision of a time of judgement in which many will be redeemed; will be once again pleasing offerings to the Lord; but in which others will be judged.

And who will be judged? Well it is a selective list – sorcerers, adulterers and liars are there, but murderers and blasphemers for instance are not – but most noticeably judgement will be upon those who oppress their hired workers, the widows and the orphans; upon those who do not attend to the alien, the stranger.

Judgement is upon those who oppress the vulnerable and do not care for the weak – it is a warning that John Howard would have understood.

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Our passage from Luke – the evangelists conflation of the separate Jewish rites of the redemption of the first born and the purification of the mother – shares and develops that theme of Malachi of pleasing offerings to the Lord; except that it is the Lord himself who is both pleasing to his heavenly Father – *This is my son, my beloved in whom I am well pleased* – and who through his life and example will open the way for others to be pleasing to God. For as wise Simeon can see; *He is a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel*; a revelation that holy Anna also discerns.

And yet here too is a theme of judgement – the presentation of Christ in the Temple not just a revelation of Jesus' divine nature, but of his calling to the cross. It is Simeon saying to Mary his mother: *This child is destined*

for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed; Simeon understanding that the one who is perfect love in human form, who always seeks the best – for love can do no other – will also spotlight the worst. The judgement of God is at heart the judgement of love against which all our short-comings, not least our oppression of the weakest and poorest, are shown up.

To put it simply - Jesus who loves the leper and the outcast; the sick and the demented; the fallible and the oppressor reveals our lack of love.

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But why this emphasis on judgement; on the convicting power of love; on a concern for the weakest; on the example of John Howard who lived in the house across lane? Why that emphasis and not a more comfortable exposition of the presentation of our Lord?

Yesterday I spent time with some of those involved in urban ministry in the poorest parts of our Diocese. All present expressed a common concern that I share that we are at one of those points in our history where once again our treatment of the weakest in our society is in focus. Jim O'Connor the Chief Executive of the NOAH project for the homeless in Luton was reported to be speaking of a forthcoming tsunami of poverty. Canon Pam Wise the Parish Priest in South Oxhey, one of the most deprived

parts of our Diocese, similarly talks of a desperate crisis of need on our doorstep. And they are not alone.

What is this tsunami? What is this crisis of need? It is the predicted outcome of the changes in Welfare that begin to be implemented from April onwards.

Welfare Reform is of itself a proper intention – not just because of the financial crisis before the country, but because the welfare system is over complicated; it can create dependency; and there are issues of justice to ensure work is rewarded.

But there is real concern – about the cumulative impact on the poorest of the penalising of under-occupation in their homes, along with reduced support for payment of the Council Tax, and the reduction in crisis grants – at a time when the resources available to the local authority to provide support services is also seriously reduced especially in our poorer urban areas. In particular – whilst the proposed Universal Credit is a welcome rationalisation of the system – there is real anxiety about the plan to pay it monthly in arrears. For many this will require a financial literacy and discipline that they just do not possess. You can see why those who work with the homeless, the addicted and the most needy are concerned. Or to quote a different authority – a handbook for GPs and other professionals in Hertfordshire concludes that the overall impact will be – *increased demand for high cost loans and*

emergency assistance. In other words more people trapped in spiralling debt and more take-up of food distribution from food-banks.

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The 'Messenger' that is Malachi desired that people might once again be presented holy before God – and that included not oppressing the vulnerable and the weak.

Our Lord is presented in the Temple as the holy first born of the Father who brings salvation to a needy world – but it is a salvation of love that will build up, but which will also disclose the darkness of the world.

John Howard was a pilgrim to the dark places of his time – who inspired by his Christian faith, as the memorial in St Paul's Cathedral says, *traversed the world to reduce the Sum of Human Misery.*

We are Christ's body – a body that is only whole when the weakest parts are attended to. We are Christ's body intended to be holy before God; witnesses to God's love in the world; called to be pilgrims to the dark places of our time. We are Christ's body – we cannot ignore the plight of the poor.

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