

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
DIOCESAN SYNOD
MARCH 2013

We are living in interesting times. Over the last few days I, along with many other bishops, have been engaging with the Welfare Bill which is making its way through Parliament. We all accept that we have to cut public expenditure. The problem is where should the burden of the cuts fall? How much of these further cuts should fall on those claiming welfare (with the worry that this could push 200,000 children into poverty) or should others bear more of the burden? Should we be looking, for example, at the billions of pounds that are going to be spent on renewing Trident?

In the coming week issues of faith and economics will be high on the agenda. On Tuesday Pope Francis, known for his concern for the poor and his criticism of inequality, will be inaugurated as Bishop of Rome. Thursday will see the enthronement of Justin Welby as Archbishop of Canterbury. As a former executive in the oil industry he has been sitting on the Banking Commission and has had some pretty trenchant things to say about banking and bankers. And between these two events we have the budget on Wednesday. Despite the howls of politicians and pundits we cannot separate faith and economics – at least, if we want to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

At this juncture in our history it is vital that we inhabit the Christian tradition with its ancient wisdom and give energy to passing it on entire to the next generation, not least when the value of the past is being increasingly marginalised. Christopher Andrews, Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at Cambridge, in his book *The Defence of the Realm*, describes a phenomenon which he calls 'Historical Attention Span Deficit Syndrome'. 'Short-termism,' he says, 'has been the distinguishing intellectual vice of [our age]. For the first time in recorded history, there has been a widespread assumption that the experience of all previous generations is irrelevant to present policy.'

For Christopher Andrews a prime example of this is the banking crisis. In our arrogance we thought we had nothing to learn from the past. We fooled ourselves into believing that in the brave new world of economic expansion we would never experience the sort of financial crises of the

past. We were wrong and we are all now suffering the consequences of our hubris.

The reason why we study history and philosophy is because it helps us recognise the blind spots that distort the vision of every generation. We discover how good, well-meaning people have sometimes made spectacular mistakes. We see how easy it is to be swept up in the latest fad and lose touch with reality until something like the collapse of the world's financial markets brings us back to our senses. Whole nations can do this – think for a moment of the madness of the Third Reich or apartheid in South Africa.

It's tempting for us to look at the past – or indeed, to other nations today - with a sense of superiority at their points of blindness, without realising that we are just as susceptible to making similar mistakes. This was brought home to me recently when reading two books by economists: one from either side of the Atlantic.

The first was by the Cambridge economist Ha-Joon Chang. In his book *23 Things They Don't Tell You about Capitalism* he demolishes many of the assumptions that fill our media. The other book was by the Harvard Professor, Michael Sandel: *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. Sandel makes a powerful case that 'in recent decades, markets and market orientated thinking have reached into spheres of life traditionally governed by nonmarket goods.'

He writes, 'Recently... many economists have set themselves a more ambitious project. What economics offers, they argue, is not merely a set of insights about the production and consumption of material goods, but also a science of human behaviour. At the heart of this science is a simple but sweeping idea: In all domains of life, human behaviour can be explained by assuming that people decide what to do by weighing the costs and benefits of the options before them, and choosing the one they believe will give them the greatest welfare or utility.' In a nutshell, Sandel's concern is that we are moving from being a market economy to being a market society.

The phrase that is sometimes used to explore this idea is that human beings are fundamentally *homo economicus* – not only are we defined and motivated by the market, but even our behaviour is determined by the market. This phrase is sometime contrasted with *homo reciprocans*, which asserts that our basic human motivations are rooted in personal relationships and in cooperation. The first term, *homo economicus*, is

ultimately associated with the elevation of the rights and sovereignty of the individual. Basically, I build a world around myself to meet my needs, and, *in extremis*, I ditch those things or those people who get in the way of my personal satisfaction.

By contrast, the term *homo reciprocans* is associated with the view that human beings are made for community and that we flourish best when we live in a network of obligations and duties, based on altruism. Of course, none of us is completely one or the other. These terms represent two overlapping circles of human relating. Nevertheless, there has been a growing consensus in some academic circles that human beings are fundamentally *homo economicus*.

In my view, not only is this elevation of the market to such a level of importance linked to a reductionist - and rather depressing - view of human existence, but in theological terms, it is idolatrous. When most of us think of idolatry we instinctively recall the Old Testament account of Moses going up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. In the Book of Exodus we learn that when he came down from the mountain he found that the people had made an idol of a golden calf and they were worshipping it. We enlightened ones of the twenty-first century know that we would never be so stupid as to worship a golden statue. But idolatry is when we put something or someone in the place of God. Idolatry is when we limit God by making him in our own image or in the image of something in the created order. Idolatry is when we say our behaviour is controlled by the market and there is nothing we can do about it.

Michael Sandel suggests that there are two worrying aspects about this insidious transition from a market economy to a market society.

The first aspect is inequality. He says, 'In a society where everything is for sale, life is harder for those of modest means... as money comes to buy more and more, the distribution of income and wealth looms larger'.

The second worry is what he calls the corrosive tendency of markets. He writes, 'Putting a price on the good things in life can corrupt them. That's because markets don't only allocate goods; they express and promote certain attitudes toward the goods being exchanged. Paying kids to read books might get them to read more, but might also teach them to regard reading as a chore rather than a source of intrinsic satisfaction. Hiring foreign mercenaries to fight our wars might spare the lives of our citizens, but might also corrupt the meaning of citizenship... Market values crowd out nonmarket values worth caring about. When we decide

that certain goods may be bought and sold, we decide, at least implicitly, that it is appropriate to treat them as commodities, as instruments of profit and use. But not all goods are properly valued in this way. The most obvious example is human beings. Slavery was appalling because it treated human beings as a commodity, to be bought and sold at auction. Such treatment fails to value human beings as persons, worthy of dignity and respect; it sees them as instruments of gain and objects of use...Or consider the rights and obligations of citizenship. If you are called to jury duty, you can't hire a substitute to take your place. Nor do we allow citizens to sell their votes, even though others might be eager to buy them. Why not? Because we believe that civic duties are not private property but public responsibilities. To outsource them is to demean them, to value them in the wrong way'.

I agree with Sandel when he says that ultimately matters of health, education, family life, nature, art, civic duties, and so on... 'are moral and political questions, not merely economic ones. To resolve them, we have to debate, case by case, the moral meaning of these goods, and the proper way of valuing them'.

So what is the Christian response to all this? Let me say two things.

First, the importance of remembering. Remembering is an act of religious obligation. We need to look back and set out lives in the context of God's story. In the words of Deuteronomy, 'Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you' (Deuteronomy 32:7). In particular the Israelites are told, 'When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous" (Deuteronomy 26:4-6).

The people of Israel are to recount the story of what God has done for them and to celebrate it, and see their lives and destinies in the context of God's eternal purposes. And this is what we are also commanded to do in the service of Holy Communion: 1 Corinthians 11. 24 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

When we share in communion, we remember the supreme example of Christ's self-emptying. And when we share in communion we become part of God's story of self-giving love, and it transforms us as women and men. As a result more of our lives and our relationships are lived in the transforming light of God's values.

Secondly, the antidote to idolatry is to worship the true God. 'The devil said "If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Worship is one of the most subversive human activities. Why was it that at the height of the Communist Revolution in both Russia and China that such energy was put into tracking down little old priests and putting them in prison? How could they possibly be a threat? They were a threat because they stood for a different interpretation of reality; they stood for different values; they worshipped a different God.

It is in this *remembering* and in this *worship* that we stand back from whatever the latest fashion or fad is and rediscover our roots. In this age of social upheaval we need, more than ever, to be rooted in Christ: to be formed by the scriptures, to inhabit the Christian tradition and build on its foundations.

So on this day as we pray for Pope Francis, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Archbishop Justin Welby, I close with words from the prophet Isaiah:

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the LORD.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
For the LORD will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song (Isaiah 51. 1-3)

15 March 2013