

TOUGH LOVE

St Michael's, Cornhill

Sunday Sept 7th 2014

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Back in the 1980s, I was a tutor in theology and the *chaplain* – that means the one in charge of worship – at Lincoln Theological College. Our two boys were very young but the oldest one did go to Sunday School. One Sunday their teacher decided it was time for some practical Christianity. So, while we were all celebrating the eucharist, off they went to pay a pastoral visit on old Mr Wells. What he made of a visit of about eight youngsters between the ages of six and ten I can't imagine!

Anyway on their way back, David their Sunday School teacher noticed Aidan looking very glum 'What's the matter, Aidan?' David asked. 'Well, I'm sad. You see Mr Wells gave us each three fun-sized Mars Bars.' 'That was very kind of him – why are you sad?' 'Well, the thing is there are four of us, Gregory and me, Mum and Dad. Three's not enough. Someone will have no Mars Bar.' David left Aidan to himself. Five minutes later his face was beaming. 'Now you look happier', said David. 'What's happened?' 'Well', said Aidan, 'It's all right after all. If I split one of the Mars bars in two, that's half a bar each for Mum and Dad, and one each for Gregory and me!' The incident has never left me. It sounds almost like one of Jesus' more obscure parables. Indeed it's a good way into today's readings. The prophet is bothered about individuals and public morality. Paul's teaching, which we heard in that marvellous piece from which Cranmer drew the words for my favourite collect – the Collect for Advent – about casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armour of light: in that same piece Paul's teaching there is again about public morality. 'He who loves his neighbour', Paul says, 'has met every requirement of the law.' Matthew too captures Jesus talking about morality and reason in our dealings with others.

Now Aidan's logic with the Mars bars at first struck me as comic, or even sharp practice! But at the heart of it was a real understanding of how we all relate to each other. It was about justice or fairness. It was about seeing oneself only in the context of others. It also, however, demonstrated a 'tough love'. Someone had to give something up if it was to work. That is undoubtedly there at the heart of the gospel. Ultimately in Jesus, it meant giving up his very life blood. This is powerful stuff and counter-cultural in our present world.

Two or three months ago, David Marquand, an outstanding political scientist published his latest book, which he titled *Mammon's Kingdom*. It is a fascinating and challenging book in at least two different ways. It has certainly thrown the cat among the pigeons! Marquand's survey of British society is magisterial. It begins in the mid-nineteenth century and he identifies three élites (he uses the word positively) – these three élites helped build the post-World War II era. They were the clerisy – public servants, with an elevated sense of duty; a working class élite; and an intellectual élite

Coming from different political standpoints, they were at one in their view of our society. Society could only prosper through a real commitment of all to each. Mutuality was at the heart. Morality was a corporate matter; we all owe our lives to each other. Interestingly enough it requires a tough love. No-one likes paying taxes, but if it means a fairer world then so be it. A similar truth stands in relation to our commitment to international equity.

Marquand's quarrel is with the inexorable drift to a *marketised culture*. The market is everything and in every aspect of our lives. It has led to a radical individualism. It is rooted in *individual* rights and not *community* and the very moral obligations it aimed to establish have been undermined by enslavement to the market.

Marquand does not grind the political axe of one particular party. All three are excoriated. He does not argue for this or that change in our parliamentary democracy. Instead – and here is the second most interesting point, he (an acknowledged unbeliever) says that it is the Church and even the essence of Christian belief and Christian humanism only that can recover a deep sense of moral purpose.

So, it is fascinating and challenging that a sympathetic outsider is asking the Church of God to help us recover that tough love with which I began. Fun-size Mars bars will not do it on their own. But such logic takes us back to the mystery which is our faith – nothing less than the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a rally call to us to challenge a weary, cynical and all too often - very shallow world. God, through us, will cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armour of life.

Amen

Readings:

Ezekiel. 33. 7-1.

Romans. 13. 8-end

Matthew. 18. 15-20.

Ezekiel. 33. 7-1.

7 So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me.

8 When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

9 Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.

10 Therefore, O thou son of man, speak unto the house of Israel; Thus ye speak, saying, If our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live?

11 Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

12 Therefore, thou son of man, say unto the children of thy people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression: as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall thereby in the day that he turneth from his wickedness; neither shall the righteous be able to live for his righteousness in the day that he sinneth.

13 When I shall say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity, all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it.

Romans. 13. 8-end

8 Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

9 For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

10 Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

11 And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.

12 The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.

13 Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying.

14 But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

Matthew. 18. 15-20.

15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

18 Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.

20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.