

*And all ye men of tender heart; Forgiving others take your part...*

Those words are from the great hymn of St Francis of Assisi and they are apt for today, Septuagesima, seventy days before Easter, when our theme is brotherly love and solidarity. On what are these things based? Well, they cannot be based on vague pietisms such as worldwide peace. As George Eliot said, *Universal peace is declared, and the foxes have a sincere interest in prolonging the life of the poultry.*

True brotherly love and a solidarity which counts for something cannot be constructed upon generally-diffused agreeable feeling or the touchy-feely tugs at the heart strings. True brotherly love and solidarity require self-giving and self-sacrifice. St Francis embodied this brotherly love and gave his whole life to the poor. There *is* a true solidarity and brotherhood of man – though I suppose we shall have to obey the Thought Police and call it *the personhood of persons* – but it comes from neither idealising nor patronising the poor: this brotherhood and solidarity comes through creating institutions which will help people escape the poverty and deprivation into which they were born.

Good schools first of all. I don't mean what people today mean by a good school. It's not a matter of having a computer for every child, or of how many pupils to a teacher, or even about modern loos. My first school was Castleton County Primary in Leeds, next to the main railway line, now and then bombed by Hitler. There were forty in our class – most of them unspeakably deprived beyond the ken of Polly Toynbee and Ed Miliband. Many children had no shoes and they came to school in rags. Many others were hungry and some would even beg for their pal's apple core at morning playtime. Exercise books were in short supply and we used chalk and slates. But by the time we were eleven we had learnt the parts of speech, how to parse an English sentence, and we were beginning clause analysis.

We were also taught the Christian faith under the terms of the 1944 Butler Education Act which provided for a daily act of worship. In short, we were given a grounding in the things that could emancipate us. Knowledge is the road to freedom. But what now goes on in schools? Never mind eleven year old pupils, you would be hard-pressed today to find a teacher who could parse an English sentence. And instead of the outline of the Christian faith, children are indoctrinated into the contemporary lie that any opinion is as good as any other.

After school, there was the library. I remember first of all the children's library. It was in the basement under the main building on Armley Town Street, not far from Alan Bennett's dad's butcher's shop. There was the smell of damp and of something that was being used to dry out the damp. But there were wonders: Hans Anderson's fairy tales and the infinitely more unsettling – and therefore instructive – *Tales of the Brothers Grimm* which agreed with the Bible's view that there is evil in the world as well as good. There also were *The Coral Island*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. When we began our teens, we were allowed up into the main library where some of us used to make a beeline for the art section, not so much to fasten ourselves upon the Golden Section but to peruse the pictures of the naked ladies there. If we giggled, we were shushed.

Nowadays public libraries are like bedlam: they are the antidote to reading. Only last week one of the Coalition's commissars for education, society and culture set out the government's ten year blueprint for the ideal library which must contain *talking books, DVDs and CDs*. Because the very word *library* revives distasteful echoes of elitism, the commissar recommends that it be renamed *idea store* which, he says, *should have the feel of a record store or Internet café*. But really a library exists to free you from the cultural slag-heap of the consumer pop culture. The commissar recommends that the librarians *all wear the same T-shirts*. They used to wear real clothes when I was a boy. He says the ultimate point of the library is to provide *a neutral welcoming community space and to support active citizenship*. It sounds like something dreamed up in East Germany under the Communists.

Neither the modern school nor the modern library stands a chance of promoting solidarity. A great patronising infantilism is being thrust upon the people by those responsible for the institutions of our land. And it all oozes from the putrescent flowering of the sentimental vision. When the devil wants to lead us away from God, he doesn't usually choose to lure us by sensational sins. The devil is the Ape of God and so his policy is to make satanic counterfeits of God's gifts and commandments. He therefore perverts virtues into vices: love into lust; humility into obsequiousness; probity into stinginess; genuine feeling into sentimentality.

Instead of brotherly love, a cloying sentimentality. Think overseas aid – that is poor people in rich countries being bullied into giving their money to rich people in poor countries. Think Fergal Keane. Think Polly Toynbee. Think Red Nose Day. Think *Candle in the Wind*. Sentimentality is not sweet and harmless, a little bit of sugary self-indulgence against the dark corners of the late afternoon. It derives from psychopathology and it leads to psychopathology.

Think of the sentimentalist Joseph Stalin at the May Day parades with tears in his eyes as he watches the long lines of little children carrying flowers – while yesterday and tomorrow he executes their parents by the tens of millions. Think of the sentimental Nazis with their perverted *strength through joy*, the silly armbands and the Kitsch *Bruderbund* songs. Or of the Chicago Mafia and Al Capone with their machine guns and their watery-eyed devotion to *Momma*. Irish republicans with their mawkish patriotic songs and their penchant for blowing up worshippers on Remembrance Sunday. The East End gangsters shared much the same poisonous emotionality. Barbara Windsor and *EastEnders* still do.

Sentimentality is the enemy of genuine emotion and true love because it is, in the words of D.H. Lawrence, *The business of working off on yourself feelings that you don't really have*. Or, as Antony Daniels said, *A sentimentalist is one who seeks the luxury of an emotion without paying for it*. For, *Sentimentality is the emotional promiscuity of those who have no genuinely rooted emotions*. Sentimentality sets the mood against the mind. And the mood is selfishness and self-indulgence.

The church goes in for sentimentality these days even in the sanctuary. A prominent Catholic church in Paris has removed from before the Blessed Sacrament the *prie Dieu* and installed thick pile carpets and armchairs. Sorrow for sins has been replaced by what the leaders of that Paris

church call *contemplative therapy* – forgetting what Karl Kraus said, *Psychotherapy is the disease for which it pretends to be the cure.*

Dorothy Parker, the American humorist, usually put her finger on precisely where things are wrong. But I have found her out in one instance. She said, *I'm a great sentimentalist. After three large drinks, I think I'm St Francis of Assisi.*

Which brings us back to St Francis. He was the very opposite of a sentimentalist. He therefore was in a position to found the friars, the brotherhood, based on brotherly love and solidarity. As Chesterton said of him, *He was ready to live on refuse. And that was something much uglier as an experience than the refined simplicity which vegetarians and water-drinkers call 'the simple life'.*

Brotherly love based on truth-telling, charity and discipleship: those are the gifts of St Francis which we celebrate on Septuagesima. Let us recall that a few years after the death of this *poor* man who chose the way of brotherly love, there were 5000 who dressed in the simple brown robe. And after a few years more, the greatest poet in Christendom, Dante Alligheri, was laid in his tomb wearing that same vestment. Amen.