

LENT COURSE 2017 Session 3

Discerning Good

21 March 2017

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While much of our sessions so far has been about Satan and signs of his power in the world, as Christians we are committed to the belief that Our Lord Jesus Christ has vanquished him and his angels through his death on the Cross and his resurrection. The signs we looked at last week - the increasing hatred towards foreigners (in the context of the EU Referendum campaign), the moral pollution caused by the possession of nuclear weapons, and the systematic undermining of the ministry of the Vicar of Christ - are not the last word. If we try to discern evil in the world we need to discern good as well - not just to help us avoid the sin of despair, but to look at the best ways in which we can all join in the defeat of evil, uniting ourselves to Jesus in his victory.

There are many sources in the Christian tradition for what we believe about moral goodness. Perhaps the most obvious is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, beginning with the Beatitudes - and we were hearing parts of it on Sundays before Lent began. It's all very simple: kindness, generosity, not being suspicious or resentful, not being self-pitying; also what we traditionally call in the Catholic Church the works of mercy, of charity. Again and again we are told in the scriptures that, aided by God's grace and not relying on our own efforts, we will be known as Jesus' disciples by our way of living, by what we do, by our good works. And what this means is that our faith has to influence and determine the whole of our lives - as the Bishops Conference of England and Wales put it in their seminal document on Catholic Social teaching from over twenty years ago, *The Common Good*, 'nothing is beyond the scope of faith.'

Affirmations of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person

Two of the three things I considered last week really concerned what we teach about the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person, created in God's image. The threat to use nuclear weapons, like procured abortion, is wrong because it is about the taking the lives of innocent human beings; moreover negative attitudes towards 'foreigners', whether they are people from the rest of Europe or refugees from elsewhere in the world, are basically rooted in contempt for the dignity of human persons. So for most of the lecture I want to identify signs of light, of goodness – not restricted to things being done by members of the Catholic Church – which overcome darkness, sin and evil in the world.

Life



My mother died nearly ten years ago. Earlier in her life she was for some years a volunteer counsellor in an advice centre in Southampton for the organisation *Life*, which campaigns against abortion and provides practical support in lots of ways for women contemplating having an abortion, through sensitive and non-judgmental presentation of other options. We are talking about thirty years ago – but if you go on the group’s website you can find links which offer the same basic service to people. *Life* helped to set up *Zoe’s Place*, a network of three hospices which offer end-of-life care to babies and toddlers. Some of you may have links with the organisation but I draw attention to it because it is essential that our witness against attacks on the sanctity of life is matched by practical work. As I may have said earlier it is also essential to remember that Catholic moral teaching is what an American cardinal once called ‘a seamless robe’ – different issues are all connected, and it is invidious to suggest that some are more important than others, or that some don’t matter alongside others. My mother was and died a committed Anglican (although she went to a Catholic school and died in a Catholic care home) but she was aware that most of her fellow volunteers in the Southampton *Life* office were Catholics.

Alongside this record of commitment there are of course problems. Sometimes campaigners against abortion, although less so in this country than elsewhere in the world (particularly the United States) campaign in a way which is counter-productive and damaging. Moreover the legislative picture is not encouraging, and nor are the ways in which Catholics and others in the medical, nursing and pharmaceutical fields often experience discrimination. It is important that as part of how we discern and are helped by signs of goodness and light we give support to those working in this field, especially the guilds for doctors and nurses.

Furthermore the issue needs to be seen in the context of other issues in healthcare ethics – other ‘bioethical’ issues and the question of healthcare resource allocation, which I looked at in a booklet published with two colleagues six years ago. A lot of things are getting worse and will get worse, and we need to be clear about the need to support healthcare staff from the rest of Europe and other parts of the world who face an uncertain future, and the need not to be taken in by the lies from the right-wing press about ‘healthcare tourism.’

Peace demonstrations



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I looked last week at the issue of nuclear weapons. Ever since the 1950s one of the signs of goodness, over and against the intention to kill millions of people in the name of our country, has been the determination of many Christians and others to demonstrate peacefully against nuclear weapons and parts of the Defence infrastructure linked to them. In the newspaper this week there was an article reminiscing about the famous Greenham Common women's camps in the 1980s, which were at the time a defining moral moment for so many of us (not just women). One thing I remember from reading about the peace camps in Berkshire was the disturbing hatred to which the women were subjected from some local people in the Newbury area, who felt threatened by them rather than the missiles and what the missiles represented. Demonstrations have continued over the years at Aldermaston, the research centre, and the Trident submarine base in Faslane in Scotland. At times demonstrators have broken into bases to dawb weapons or buildings with paint, or even to celebrate Mass. Many people associated with the *London Catholic Worker*, which we support in this parish, have taken part in these actions and been arrested and imprisoned, including the Passionist priest who led the community for some years, Fr Martin Newell, who has been here to preach.

These acts are a clear sign of goodness and light. God's moral law, the law of the 'heavenly city' transcends the laws of the State, the 'earthly city'. The possession of nuclear weapons with the intent to use them is a moral outrage, in relation to them the State's laws do not have legitimacy for faithful Christians. The Catholic Church in its moral teaching has repeatedly made it clear that while we favour democratic and representative forms of government (and that endorsement is comparatively recent) voters and parliamentarians do not have *carte blanche* to enact immoral laws. So it wouldn't matter if every MP or every voter wanted to legalise abortion or maintain nuclear weapons – such laws would still be contrary to God's law and not bind the Christian. This means that you are entitled to demonstrate against these things and break the law to draw attention to the moral outrage which you are identifying. Violence, or for that matter violent and abusive language, are not acceptable.

The Catholic Church and refugees



I talked last week about how negative attitudes towards refugees and migrants sullied the whole EU Referendum campaign and really rather defined it; of course this is true in different ways in the rest of Europe at the moment, and indeed all over the world. The issue was similarly nasty in the US Presidential campaign, the recent General Election in the Netherlands, and will be in polls taking place in France and Germany this year. The Catholic Church at all levels, together with other churches and faith communities, have repeatedly condemned this set of attitudes and criticised politicians who have furthered their self-interest by colluding with this, including Catholics who should know better. For the Church it has become more and more of a defining issue, all over the world, and one person who has seen that very clearly is the present Holy Father. Early on in his pontificate he went to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, near which so many migrants sailing from North Africa have been drowned, to celebrate Mass with the migrants encamped on the island and those caring for them.

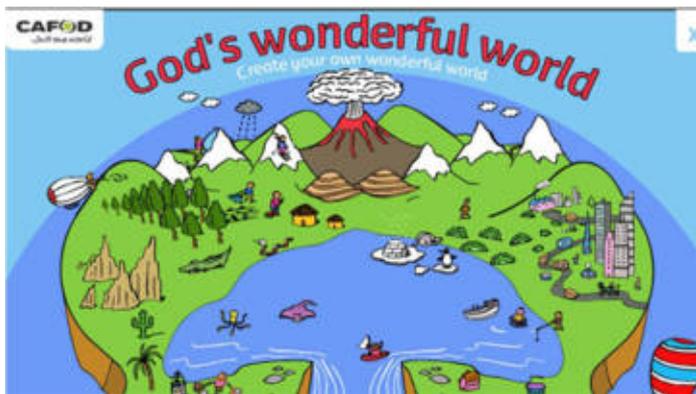
Just as hostility to migrants and refugees is a real sign of evil and the presence of Satan in the world, so the ways in which we resist this and try and support its victims are symbols of goodness, virtue and light in the world. Jesus calls us repeatedly in the gospel to offer unconditional love to those who are most in need; while the sufferings of people are appalling and getting worse, we are given an opportunity to show the face of Christ to others, to see his face in others, to witness to our faith in the midst of so much falsehood and sheer hatred.

There are numerous examples of where we see goodness in the world in relation to this. In Lampedusa and other places where migrants have been encamped, often in terrible conditions, local people, often very poor themselves, have rallied round in the name of Christ to help people. You see this in so many places – it's often the poor who do the most to help those who are worse off than they are. Overall in the world the Catholic Church is the largest provider of relief and welfare services to refugees, in camps, (e.g. in the Middle East), mediated through the umbrella group *Caritas* and through Religious Orders (in JRS and

others). We probably need to do more to make ourselves and others aware of this work, and do more to support it. Since Pope Francis has called on every Catholic parish in Europe to take in refugees all of us have something to do – you will know about the initiative of our new Salesian sisters here, and the *LCW* house I mentioned earlier is a community made up of asylum seekers – but there is always more we can do (I will look at this next week).

Telling the story of goodness and love in the world – especially when things seem gloomy – is part of how we can dispel ignorance and mendacity, and it's particularly important that we put forward this narrative in Catholic schools; in our parish school the children regularly write messages to refugees under a scheme organized by CAFOD, and one of teachers, Ann Davies, wrote an article describing this exercise in an issue last year of *The Pastoral Review*. Indeed the commitment of young Catholics in relation to this issue – in lots of ways and at different levels, is a real sign of goodness and of hope for the future of the Church, especially when children and young people are exposed to so many messages of hate (perhaps from their parents) and when young people face a rather uncertain future.

Following Peter - *Laudato Si'* and St Mary's School



Last week my third example of the 'smoke of Satan' in the world was the campaign against the present Holy Father. It's no use just moaning about it or expressing outrage, in the hope that the pope's enemies might be struck by lightning: our duty is to support his initiatives and to teach one another about them. There are lots of ways in which we can do this, but one area in which it has been relatively easy as been in relation to the encyclical letter the pope wrote about the care of creation in 2015. *Laudato Si'*, to which I referred last week as it is one of the things for which he has been criticised within the Church.

A sign of goodness: last summer, a year after the letter was written, CAFOD launched an initiative aimed at Catholic primary schools, with very well produced material, to help children understand what the pope had been saying and to get them to think about how to care for the environment. In our school for a whole week in the summer the children focused on this, with a special whole school Mass at the end; it was personal, not simply 'out there', getting the children to think about things like turning a light out when they leave a room or turning the tap of properly when they've cleaned their teeth (incidentally, whenever I feel that this church is rather over-heated, which is rather a lot of the time, I recall the Holy Father's

encouragement in the letter that we should put on an extra layer of clothing and turn the heating down!)

Children and Young People in general



Again, it is perhaps through children and young people that we can really point to signs of goodness and light – this is important because sometimes those of us who are not young any more are apt to moan about them.

Another sign of goodness we can see in relation to young people is the tremendous work done by HCPT pilgrimages to Lourdes each year after Easter, for which we have in the past raised money in this parish. Coloma Convent girls school and many other Catholic secondary schools get involved in this, making a very powerful statement about the distinctive character of our schools. The young people from the school communities are enabled to see how their faith can be lived out in very physically demanding witness. It is a statement in other ways, of course - the dignity and human rights of disabled people is gravely threatened by abortion and human fertilisation legislation in this country. I am afraid I have been to Lourdes so perhaps this part of the talk should have been given by one of our young people who has.

In so many ways children and young people – not just in the Catholic Church – give us hope. They are capable of responding generously to those who suffer most, they are often genuinely internationalist in outlook, and they respond very well to the teachings of Pope Francis. On that note of happiness and goodness, I will finish.