

Making the World Good

It's been a troubling couple of weeks. There were those two women police officers shot in Bradford, one of them killed. We've heard about terrible cases of bullying in schools. There seems to be little light on the horizon for the victims of rape. There are times when we feel that our world is falling apart. The old certainties are giving way. Crime and antisocial behaviour seem to be on the increase. We have more and more rules and regulations; there is ever more surveillance and yet there seems to be an increase of thuggishness lacking any respect for other people and with no fear of the authorities.

We must not overstate the case. As we get older, we all tend to think the world is going to the dogs. It is also true that the middle years of the twentieth century were, for various reasons, a period in which the incidence of crime was unusually low. You only have to read Dickens to see what life on the streets was like in the nineteenth century and it wasn't any better in the centuries before Queen Victoria. Many of us were brought up in an unusually orderly period of human history. The young men (who, in any period, commit most crimes) were serving in the armed forces. Poverty, another cause of crime, was gradually being conquered. Education was dispelling ignorance – yet another reason why some people live brutal lives. The huge effort of the Victorian Church to spread the Christian religion to all classes and regions and to impose Christian values on society was bearing some fruit.

We ask ourselves why we feel our society is falling apart and what can be done about it? Some of our unease may simply be due to change. Maybe we cannot adjust to change or do not see why we should have to. Some modern values are better than older ones. No-one today would advertise a room to let with a notice "No Blacks, No Irish, No Jews", but such signs were not uncommon in the 1950s. None of us would want to go back to the casual racism of the past, but we may well be more uneasy about other changes in social attitudes over the last fifty or so years. We have gone from condemning sex outside marriage, divorce and homosexuality almost to celebrating them in a couple of generations. Some of us welcome these changes. Some of us still resist them outright. Most of us Christians accept them but with varying degrees of unease.

We can all agree, however, in being concerned by the rise in gun crime, other kinds of violent crime, binge-drinking and other drug related activities which certainly are much more prevalent and more of a threat than was the case even ten years ago. I think we do feel threatened by a job culture and worse.

But what should be done about it? There are so many different ideas. Some people think we should have an armed police force, that we should remove some of our legal safeguards so that it is easier to convict the accused with much less paperwork, that we should introduce more severe forms of punishment, including the death penalty. There certainly is a place for firmness and punishments which are just, which reflect the severity of the offence and take proper account of the victim's sufferings. As Christians, however, we will not suffer a legal system which convicts the innocent. Neither will we countenance punishments which forget the humanity of the criminal. However wicked someone may be, he is still made in the image of God; Jesus still died for him. Even when we impose severe punishments which reflect the enormity of the most horrible crimes, we cannot so far lose sight of our duty to

love the criminal as Jesus loves him that we degrade his essential humanity by the punitive action we take.

Some people blame social policy. Crime is certainly more rife on the poor estates. There is an association between deprivation and criminality. There is also a race factor. Some people think we have too many immigrants, bringing in alien cultures. Others blame the ghetto mentality on a failure on the part of the white community to be sufficiently welcoming. These matters are complex and I do not want to go into them here. Christians will, however, always work for the relief of poverty and other forms of deprivation whether doing so reduces crime or not. Caring for those in need is straightforwardly a Christian duty. Christians will also work for racial harmony. There is no room for apartheid in the Church, where, from the very beginning, St Paul taught there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free, male or female, barbarian or Scythian. We are all one in Christ. That must be our vision for our nation as well as our Church.

We could blame alcohol and other drugs for the frightening rise in crime and antisocial behaviour. They certainly do play an enormous part. Maybe we should ask ourselves, however, what is so wrong with the lives of many young people that they feel they can only be happy if they are drunk or otherwise intoxicated?

Some of us also blame the breakdown in family life. How much juvenile delinquency is the result of growing up without a responsible father or with a mother who puts her own social life before the care of her children? But, again, how did sex become a recreation, a compulsion even? What is wrong with people's lives that they cannot see that there is much greater fulfilment in a relationship where responsibility is accepted for the partner and for any children than in the selfish pursuit of one's own personal gratification? Why can people not go without if they can only get what they want by breaking up somebody else's marriage or neglecting their children or other people for whom they have a responsibility?

And some people blame the schools or at least the social milieu in which they have to operate. When I was at school, there were consistent standards of behaviour expected. These were at least nominally consistent with the Christian religion which is what we were taught in Religious Instruction. Those who stepped out of line expected to be punished and when pupils were punished by teachers, the teachers could expect to be backed by the head, the LEA and normally the parents. Academic subjects were taught rigorously and success in public examinations depended on individual personal effort even from a young age. Competitive games taught teamwork and self-discipline. Now social values can no longer be underpinned by religion because religion has become a private matter for families and individuals rather than part of our shared culture. We have rightly recoiled from giving adults powers over children which could be abused. Rightly concerned to help the less able to fulfil their potential, we have tried to get rid of the stigma of failure in exams and losing at games by providing a lot more help and offering far fewer opportunities to compete. I am not going to say I know which is better. I know where my prejudices lie, but they are better aired in the saloon bar than the pulpit, and not even in the bar if anyone is likely to take me too seriously.

At this point, some of you will be thinking that it is all down to discipline. Young people (and older people) need to be told what to do and warned that there will be unpleasant consequences if they err. To an extent, that must be true. Societies need laws – something like the Ten Commandments which we read earlier – and there have to be sanctions to ensure that those laws are obeyed. I would go further, however. Beyond discipline, we need self-discipline. It is much better in principle that we obey the law voluntarily rather than because we are afraid of the consequences of disobeying. It is also better in practice. If people obey the Law only because they cannot get away with not obeying it, they will disobey if they think they won't get caught or aren't afraid of punishment. We need to learn self-discipline. We need to be taught from an early age to respect ourselves and to respect other people. That respect is the basis of all good laws and that respect for human beings derives from a proper respect for God. It is because we are made in the image of God that you and I are of infinite value. And so are all human beings. And that is the basis of all our Law and all our ethics.

So we need to go beyond discipline and further even than self-discipline. We go on to a related word – discipleship. Jesus said “Go and make disciples of all the nations, teaching them to obey my commandments and baptise them.” We need to teach our children God's Commandments. There might be all sorts of disputes within the Church about marriage and divorce, gays, the place of women in church leadership etc. None of these disagreements, however, undermines the fundamentals – that we should love the Lord our God, with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength and that we should love our neighbours as ourselves. Teach that to our children. Teach that to the people of England. Teach it to the world.

But there is more to life than Law or ethics. Human beings are made in God's image and we will not rest (as St Augustine put it) till we find our rest in Him. Young people don't need drugs, sex and rock and roll - or even GCSEs and a place in the first 15. They need Jesus. And we need to tell them that. That is what Jesus commissioned us to do. It is not just a matter of getting people to live in accordance with God's commandments. It would be a much more peaceful world if we did, but it would also be a barren world, a lifeless world. In order to be fulfilled, human beings need a living relationship with Jesus Christ. We need to know Him if we are to know forgiveness of our sins. We need to know Him if we are to have life in abundance, joy in all its fullness.

Young people don't need drugs, sex and rock and roll. They need Jesus. And what do we older people think that we need more than Jesus? Whatever we put before Him diminishes our resources as human beings. Insofar as we fail to put Jesus first, we reduce our capacity, our entitlement even, to share our faith with others.

If we want to stop the world going to the dogs, there is a lot to be said and done about the relief of poverty, the police, the criminal justice system, schools, immigration, family policy and the rest and, as Christians, we have an important part in those debates and a significant role in all kinds of social action. What, however, God has uniquely entrusted to us is conversion, mission, evangelism, the word of life which takes an ordinary human being and enables him or her to find fulfilment in Jesus Christ. That is uniquely our task and no-one

else will do it if we Christians don't. What are you doing about passing on your faith to our children and sharing it with your neighbours in this village and beyond?