

PENTECOST 15

‘Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.’

1 Peter 2:13

In the time when St. Peter wrote these words, the whole structure of political power was believed to be authorised by God. When Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea said to Jesus at his trial ‘Surely you know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?’ , Jesus replied ‘You would have no power over me if it had not been given you from above.’ Jesus himself believed that power, religious power or political power came from God. This did not mean that those who exercised that power were therefore godly people. In fact the Gospel reading for today clearly shows that Herod, the King of Judea, was corrupt and immoral. It seems that power has always tended to corrupt human beings. What we see happening in The White House in recent times is not new. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The rulers in Jerusalem during the life-time of Jesus of Nazareth were called the Sanhedrin. They functioned under the presidency of the High Priest who was under obedience to Caesar. Jesus had little to do with this power structure. He was not a Priest a scribe – nor was he a theologian. Jesus was an ordinary layman. The people, who became his followers, did so, not because he was left-wing – or right wing – but because he loved them, as they were, and they loved him. He had a vision of a new way of living; a way which seemed to turn the accepted life-style upside down. He did not set out to knock the establishment – religious or political – yet both groups eventually became his enemies and collaborated to bring about his death. There was clearly, something about Jesus which made people in authority feel threatened; which made political and religious leaders feel insecure.

Well of course, in a sense, Jesus was a revolutionary. If by ‘revolution’ we mean a radical change of the ‘status quo’, then the

teaching of Jesus was certainly revolutionary. Nevertheless no one could put up a serious case to prove that Jesus was a terrorist, a rebel or a political agitator. He did of course lead a public demonstration by riding into Jerusalem at the Passover Festival riding on a donkey. Not for him the victor’s white charger; not for him a symbol of power, but the mount used by the poor and the powerless. His revolution was, and still is, non-violent. Its threat lies in its apparent folly. He threatens the basic assumption that ‘might is right.’ Naturally those people who occupy positions of power and influence tend to be suspicious of anyone who appears to be criticising the assumptions upon which the power structure is founded. It was inevitable then, that Jesus would reach a situation of conflict with the authorities. The rest is, as we say, history.

‘Never mix religion with politics’ they say. But anyone who quotes the teaching of Jesus cannot avoid the inevitable political implications. Consider just a few of his sayings.

‘Anyone who lives by the sword will die by the sword.’

‘Do not resist the evil-doer.’

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the left cheek also.’

‘do good to those who hate you.’

‘bless those who curse you.’

‘Pray for those who persecute you.’

It is argued by some, that the teaching of Jesus is too idealistic and even dangerous. But when we look at the state of the world today I wonder where the ideals are – I wonder where danger lies.

Unless some radical rethinking is done about the way we manage our politics and our economics the world will continue to hurtle towards self-destruction like the Gadarene swine in the gospel.

We are at a critical juncture of history. The Cold War is over. Profound economic, ethnic, and environmental changes lie before us in a time that cries out for alternative vision. But where will such vision be found? And who will be the visionaries? I

believe that there are many people waiting in the wings of society who are longing for a new age to begin. Men and women who have learned that social change will be based upon reclaiming the moral values of personal responsibility, social compassion, and economic justice. New visions of community spirit, and responsible political power can transcend the petty divisions which now exist between political and religious factions. The Christian Gospel can, even now, generate a new moral and political will to change our lives and our communities. When these things begin to come to pass, then I believe that we shall begin to say – the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

AMEN