

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick for Advent 3 (2015)

John the Baptist taught, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." (Luke 3: 8)

A shopkeeper heard one of his assistants say to a customer, "No madam, we haven't had any for some weeks now and it doesn't look as if we'll be getting any soon."

Horrified at what he was hearing the shopkeeper rushed over to the woman as she was walking out and said, "That isn't true madam. Of course we'll have some soon. In fact, we placed an order for it just last week."

Then he drew the poor assistant aside and growled, "Never, ever say we don't have something. If we don't have it, say we've ordered it and it's on its way. Now what was it she wanted?"

"Rain," said the assistant.

On the subject of selling things to people, apparently the sportswear company Nike has a policy aim of trying to ensure that children are aware of their logo from the age of 18 months and making children into consumers by the age of 3. In terms of political systems, the triumph of the west over the east at the end of the last century has really meant the triumph of globalised consumption over any other form of economic activity. That, in turn, has meant that the main model for contemporary citizenship is now that of the consumer. You may remember the Barclays Bank advert which had the larger than life Robbie Coltrane doing his banking, on the internet, in his pyjamas. He said, "It's a liberating experience, I can tell you." But finished with the warning, "You know what these means, don't you ... We're all bank managers now!"

And, in a similar way, we're all consumers now whether we want to be or not. We cannot escape it. Even public services such as health and education use the language and culture of consumer and provider. Now, please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying this is – of necessity – **all** bad and there haven't been benefits which have come with these developments. Although the ongoing discussions about the human impact upon climate change shows there are also serious challenges presented by our economic activity.

So there are positives and negatives but what I do find worrying is that this seems to be the **only** model of communal life which matters. If we're not acting as consumers, exercising our right to choose, then we're somehow less than fulfilled as human beings. To paraphrase Descartes' well-known summary of what it is to be human: I think therefore I am – I consume therefore I am. And we're all part of this process. We can't isolate ourselves from it because the changes being wrought affect every area of life. We see their impact on towns and cities, shops and schools and many social structures and organizations.

Interestingly, one of the few organizations which provides some alternative ideas about what it is to be a community is the Church. Let me be clear. I'm not saying that the way the Church does things is the right way, while the way that supermarkets and stores is the wrong way. Nor am I *merely* saying that there's room for different ways to co-exist. As a Church we have to believe that what we offer is important to our

community and is of value to the social fabric of this locality and society in general. In this day and age, the Church and what we stand for must be seen to matter or it will go the way of the dodo. It will become extinct if we just take it for granted and do not proclaim why we think it is important.

So let me just give one reason why I think the Church is still vital and what an understanding of ourselves as citizens of the Kingdom of God provides which understanding ourselves as citizens of a consumer society does not. Although shopping is partly about dreams and imagination, it's also about something more hard-edged than that. It's about ownership. We pay out money to say that we 'own' that particular piece of property. The Church is also about ownership but in a much more open and generous way. The Church is about belonging to the family of God and being part of the community which has recognised God's grace in the world and in their lives. One of the wonderful things about Christmas is the sense that through Christ God is giving us something truly precious and truly priceless.

Tolstoy tells the story of a man who stopped to give alms to a beggar but to his dismay he found that he had left his money at home. Embarrassed and stammering his explanation, he said, "I'm sorry *brother* but I have nothing."

"Never mind brother," was the beggar's answer, "that too was a gift." The one word 'brother' and the recognition of the beggar as an equal as much as any amount of money.

That spirit of being equal and inclusive is an important part of the Incarnation which we celebrate at Christmas. We belong to God, through Christ, not in the sense of being 'owned' but in a sense that we have a share in God's grace and God's love, which is profound and transforming. God's grace and God's love are free gifts, shared in and through Christ not bought or traded. Nor are they things that we have by right; as John the Baptist said – in effect – to his listeners: "Don't believe that you have God's grace purely on the basis of your antecedents. The gifts of God can be bestowed wherever – even to these inanimate objects lying in the desert!"

And that's why the sacrament of baptism is so important because as we pour the water over the one being baptised, it symbolises God's generosity poured over each us and that we belong to God not by accident of birth or ancestry but through God's redeeming work. That, in turn, should be the basis of a radical understanding of community that's based not on possession or ownership but on the same welcome that Mary gave when an angel came to call and said, "Are you ready for God to transform your life?" Just as God can transform the lives of those who heard John the Baptist preaching and the life of a young woman who suddenly and unexpectedly found herself pregnant, so God can transform our hearts and minds, if we're open to those moments of grace, when God's kingdom is incarnated in our lives and in the lives of those with whom we share God's Church and God's creation.

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