

Culture & Christianity

(2) Christianity and Culture: Past and Present

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Reading: Numbers 21: 4-9

Text: 'We detest this miserable food'

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I am, so I am reliably informed, here to preach with the topic of the past and present of Christian Culture in mind. The lesson, from that slightly dumbed down replay of Exodus, the Book of Numbers- is not, on the face of it, particularly promising. True- it tells a tale of the past and one that is replete with typical Israelite grumbling- so could pass for relating to 'culture' here in England, a country that has made pessimistic complaining into a bedrock of national life, but it would be difficult to say anything especially meaningful about the eternal's relationship with the explicitly temporal based merely on coincidences of chronology and on a predilection for grumpiness.

However, as I read through the passage in preparation for this sermon a particular phrase did leap out as having something to speak about in this regard. As the Israelites list their complaints- in a manner not dissimilar to one I employed as a child when compiling the list of things I demanded from my poor parents, be it coca cola, more free time or, at one point a monkey- they tail things off with the statement: 'we detest this miserable food!'. It all has a slight air of the ridiculous; these are people, after all, who have just escaped the unimaginable brutality of life as a slave underclass in Egypt and now they have the gall to complain about the menu choices. It's a little like surviving a crash landing in an aeroplane, then calling a stewardess over, pointing at the remains of the beef goulash plastered on the back of the seat in front of you and saying 'actually I wanted the salmon.'

Fortunately air stewardesses aren't equipped with snakes, for that is the response the Israelites get for their rather ridiculous complaining. Yet, while we might live in a culture of complaint (and- as anyone who's ever eaten in a Bella Italia will know- of miserable food as well), it may still escape you quite what this has to do with the vast topic of Christianity's past and present engagement with culture.

Perhaps we might turn to the Authorised or King James Version for further guidance- after all, alongside the Prayer Book, from which our service was taken this evening, it forms the bed rock of so much Anglophone spoken and written culture, being just about the only text or touchstone that English's speakers had in common for nigh on four hundred years. The KJV renders 'miserable food' as 'light bread' in its translation.

Miserable food and light bread- I fear that much of Christian engagement with culture, both past and present, falls into one of these two camps. On one hand we have the image of the inquisitor, the flames he has kindled with subversive books lighting up his granite face and on the other we have the bristling visage of the inexorably joyful Jesus follower, who goes through life with the genuine belief that the vast complexities of human cultural experience will fade away with the deployment of

a smile and a verse of 'Jesus wants me for a sunbeam'. Both are, of course, extremes, stereotypes and yet, inevitably, are grounded in a degree of historical and contemporary truth- we have been all too fond of providing an engagement with the culture of the world around us either with miserable food or all too light bread.

There are of course, times for drawing attention to the seriousness of the faith (Lent is one of them) and there is a place in the Christian life for a simplified message of 'just loving' but the problem with miserable food is that it makes Christianity- a faith centred on the jocund conquest of petty death-seem joyless and judgemental, whereas the issue with light bread is that it renders what we claim as the answer to the great complexities of human existence asinine and pedestrian, and, crucially detached from a world more often rent with shadows than sunbeams.

I would suggest that, at the root of Christianity, indeed throughout Christian engagement with culture over the centuries, there is a different mode of engagement. The issue with both miserable food and light bread is that they both take the culture which they seek either to suppress or embrace far too seriously. They assume that the cultural expressions of this age, or any age, are themselves a unique threat or opportunity- instead, I would suggest, the Christian calling is to look at such cycles- for what is secular culture but a sort of reverse tumble dryer, round which ideas rotate, each time coming across increasingly soiled- to look at such cycles with wry amusement. In short- Christianity has had its best relationships with culture in the past and will have them in the present when it is subversive.

To be clear- this is not an appeal for Christianity to retreat to the comfortable edges of society, holing itself up in a cultural cave of Adullam, sniggering at its own jokes and loudly proclaiming its own righteousness. Rather it is a suggestion that we are at our best as Christians when we engage with culture but refuse to be either beguiled or browbeaten by it. It is, I would suggest, actually very difficult to be subversive from the outside. Instead, to purloin Biblical phrase, we might see ourselves as leaven- not as drops of pure morality or even altruistic kindness in an otherwise steaming sea of selfishness- but, to retreat to a closer etymology, as bringers of levity.

This, however, must not be merely the 'light bread' of above- the glorious paradox of historical Christian levity is that it has often been incredibly weighty. Christian levity has been at its funniest and at its most devastating when it has come from within, when it has taken seriously the numerous Biblical injunctions against taking ourselves or the world, well, too seriously. This might sound paradoxical but that's rather the point- after all, we, like the Israelites detest both light bread and miserable food. The thread of past culture is filled with figures who embraced this paradox and so managed to show human culture, and the wider human experience, for what it is: a parade of folly ridden clownishness, yet one that is, by the presence of the Christ redeemed by God.

There was the monk, Rabelais- who turned toilet humour into an art form, realising the profound comedy of the bodily. His giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel, had the ability to create races of dwarves from their farts. Then there was Swift- the great Anglican Dean- whose 'savage indignation' had the grotesque follies of humanity firmly in his sights and observed that, nothing in the world is really constant except inconstancy. It would be remiss not to mention Jane Austen, perhaps the greatest prodigy amongst Rectory progeny- is there a start to an analysis of human folly simultaneously more cutting and comforting than 'it is a truth universally acknowledged...'? And, of course, Laurence Sterne, country parson and master of the ridiculous who gifted us Tristram Shandy and observed, tongue very firmly in cheek, that 'keyholes are the occasions of more sin and wickedness than all the other holes in this world put together'. I think it is a matter of great regret that weighty Anglican documents, say, for instance, pastoral advice from Bishops, do not begin with

wise words such as these. Each understood that our position in relation to God is an ironic one and yet, in that irony is a deeper, much deeper, glory.

To return to our reading from Scripture- the snakes are eventually neutralised due to some quick metal work by Moses. Yet Moses's redemptive act is one that is deeply imbued with irony. He places in front of the Israelites an object that is deeply subversive and paradoxical- it is a graven image and yet one imbued with the power of a God who detests such things, it gives healing from the much feared bite of a serpent, yet it is the image of a serpent itself. The lesson here, then, is less one of miraculous healing and more, I would suggest, of the ironic, paradoxical truth at the heart of God's interactions with us. St Paul in his letter to the Galatians tell us, rightly, that 'God is not mocked'; the episode with the Israelites takes things one further- it demonstrates that, in many ways, God mocks us.

This, I would suggest, ought to be a starting point for any Christian engagement with the shifting sands of cultural norms of past and present. A realisation that our cultural tropes and the things we take oh so seriously will not only look as ridiculous to the people of the future as the obsessions of the past look to us now, but also, crucially, that it all looks absolutely preposterous from the viewpoint of the eternal. All of this requires something of a double subversion- that of the ways of the world and, of course, of our own inability to apply the rules we inflict on others to ourselves: as Swift said 'satire is a sort of glass, wherein each man views every reflection except his own'

If Christian engagement with culture in the present is to avoid the stonily serious or sweetly sanctimonious pitfalls of the past, it is best off muddily engaged with the memes, the dreams, and the mess of life, but gazing not on the brass snake of that cultural or political or social moment, but with an eye, instead, on God in the person of Jesus Christ. Such a look, then, must necessarily be one that looks at culture askance- an ironic side-eye if you will- for how else can we look at culture, past and present, if we are to keep one eye, and, crucially, our one heart, focussed on God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.