

The Launch of the Christian Socialist Movement Archive Sarum College, Salisbury, 26 April 2003

When, in Matthew Chapter 10, Jesus sent out his disciples to preach that *"the kingdom of heaven is near"*, he told them this: *"Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves"*.

For me, that is a pretty good summary of how the followers of Jesus are supposed to behave today. It reflects the tensions in our walk - citizens of Britain, but citizens of heaven too. Honouring Caesar, but serving Christ. Existing in the reality which we share with everybody else, but recognising that there is a deeper reality which many around us do not recognise.

I think it is a particularly good summary of what is required for those followers of Christ who are active in politics. What Jesus' words tell us is that we have to be these two things - shrewd as snakes, and innocent as doves. Both of those things at the same time.

We are called by Jesus to be shrewd - to go beyond the naivety which has characterised far too much of Christian comment on politics - to take part in the real work of politics, not just to dabble in it. We need to develop political skills. We need really to understand what is happening in the world around us, and to be committed to changing it for the better. We are called to be shrewd.

And we are called to be innocent. To be faithful to what we believe and faithful in serving Christ. That means not being devious, not making compromises on truth or values. Not lying to people, but instead being trustworthy. Holding firm with the vision of goodness which the Bible presents to us. We are called to be innocent.

We tend to think of those two things as being in conflict with each other - even perhaps to be incompatible. Our experience is that if you are innocent then you get outmanouvered, that being shrewd means knifing somebody else in the back. But that is not what we see in the life of Jesus. And we are called to be both shrewd and innocent at the same time. Not to trade them off against each other. Not selling out on innocence in order to achieve a goal which shrewdness has commended to us. To be at all times both wholly innocent and wholly shrewd, and to explore ways indeed in which those two characteristics support each other. That is our calling in politics. And that is the test I would like to see applied to studying what is in this archive - how effective has the Christian Socialist Movement been in bringing shrewdness and innocence to British politics?

Shrewd and innocent - not one or the other, but both at the same time. I wonder if that reminds you, as it reminds me, of some of the political slogans of our time:

- *"Rights matched by responsibilities"*
- *"A strong economy and a strong society are two sides of the same coin"*
- *"Tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime."*

I was in a seminar yesterday where the new leader of the Dutch Labour Party said that slogan - translated, I presume, into Dutch - had been key to the success of his party in the Dutch elections three months ago, following its catastrophic defeat last year.

To that list of slogans we might add the whole idea of the third way itself. Shrewd and innocent. Serpents and doves. Not one or the other, but both.

Socialism in Britain has its origins in Christian faith. It is in the challenging of poverty that Socialism and Christianity are most closely linked. For me there is no escape from the teaching of the Bible that the first duty of Christians engaged in politics is to challenge poverty. That should be the passion of the believer in politics. And if that is your starting point in politics, then it is to socialism that you will turn. In practice, there has been a great deal of distance between Christianity and Socialism in Britain - this archive might help to explain why. But the Christian Socialist Movement is building on very sound foundations in working to bring them together.

A question which interests me is this. Looking back at the history of Christian Socialism, at the forty years represented in this archive and the more than 100 years before that since the term Christian Socialism was coined in the middle of the nineteenth century - with a magazine called the Christian Socialist having first been published in 1850 - how far has Christian Socialism been able to achieve this fusion which it has been called to of shrewdness and innocence? Has it been shrewd, but fallen down on innocence? Has it been great on innocence but been lacking in shrewdness. Or perhaps it hasn't been either innocent or shrewd?

I have just finished reading the fine new biography published last year of one of the most important figures in the Christian Socialism of the Labour Party - George Lansbury. He was the Leader of the Party in the 1930s, after the Great Betrayal when the Party's first leader, Ramsay Macdonald, went off to lead the National Government coalition - effectively as Labour Prime Minister to go off and become the Leader of the Conservative Party. George Lansbury died in 1940, so well before this archive starts, but his influence endures. He was described as one of the best loved figures in British politics - "Good old George", as Bob Holman titled his more popular biography a decade or so ago.

The reason Bob Holman, himself a wonderful Christian Socialist, is such a big admirer of George Lansbury is for the consistency of his life and his message. He lived at 39 Bow Road - his house was always open - his hard-pressed constituents from Poplar could call at any time and be assured of a warm welcome and help. He ran a timber yard so was a small businessman, but he was never rich. He was deeply committed to seeing the Kingdom of God delivered in practical reality. His successor as Labour Party leader, Clem Attlee, said of him on his death that *"He was a sincere and devoted Christian who strove to follow in the footsteps of his Master"*. In the powerful campaigning articles he wrote for the Daily Herald, George Lansbury constantly banged on about the Christian imperative for justice and against poverty. In one of the Bulletins he published supporting the striking workers in the General Strike of 1926, he wrote this:

"Keep in mind the fact that the Son of Man, the Christ who lived and was executed by the government of his day, was a great leader, and leader of the common people. It was his great message of Love and Brotherhood which brought him to his death. He knew the poor of the earth were oppressed by the rich and the wealthy, and in scathing terms denounced the money changers and all those who defiled the temple and brought suffering to starving humanity."

The book includes a picture of his house in Bow Road in 1937, with a banner strung across which read *"The Greatest Thing in the World is Love"*. On innocence, there is for me no doubt that George Lansbury scores very highly indeed.

But what about on shrewdness? Well George Lansbury was a very influential man. When I was the Secretary of Newham North-East Labour Party in the early 1980s and we were struggling with dealing with the cuts being imposed on our budgets by the then Tory Government in rate-capping, it was the example of George Lansbury which many people pointed to - George Lansbury and the members of Poplar Council went to prison in 1921 because they refused to implement the cuts in support for the poor and unemployed which the very unfair local government funding system of the day forced upon them. The result, incidentally, was that the law was changed. And George Lansbury's very shrewd management of the publicity around that whole episode was part of the reason for his success. As Leader of a shattered parliamentary Labour Party after 1931, he was very effective in rebuilding, and providing an effective opposition to a rampant National Government with an overwhelming majority - so paving the way for the later Labour Government elected after the Second World War.

But it is in this area of shrewdness that we can find fault with George Lansbury's record. He went to visit Lenin in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s and came back deeply impressed with what he saw. He was a deeply committed pacifist, and he should have quit the party leadership when it became clear that the Labour Party was not going to adopt a pacifist response to the development of fascism. He did not resign because everybody kept asking him to carry on. His great humiliation came at the 1935 Labour Party Conference when, after Lansbury had made a strong and popular reaffirmation of his Christian pacifism, a seething Ernie Bevin accused him cruelly of *"hawking your conscience round from body to body asking to be told what to do with it"* - and what really hurt was that none of those who had been urging him to continue as Leader stood up at the Conference to support him. Later in the 1930s - by this time almost 80 - he went to visit Adolf Hitler to try and persuade him out of military aggression, and came back with a favourable report.

For all the many things which can be said in his support, George Lansbury who rates so highly on innocence has to be judged as having fallen down on shrewdness.

One could point to others for whom the opposite could be said. Graham Dale's wonderful book on Christian Socialism, *God's Politicians*, reveals just how important Christian faith was in the make up of Harold Wilson. On shrewdness, few could match him. But it has been in the area of principle, of political values, in other words of the innocence which Jesus spoke about in which history has so far judged him rather harshly.

I think if one was to review this archive, one would probably conclude that the score of the Christian Socialist Movement on innocence has been higher than the score on shrewdness. I have been a CSM member for rather more than half of its forty year existence covered by this archive. Just after I joined in the early 1980s I attended a summer school at the University of Kent where I met people who still seemed to be struggling with their discovery, a quarter of a century before, that Stalin had not after all been ushering in the Kingdom of God in the Soviet Union. What we need in Christian Socialism is yes, unequivocally, the innocence which characterised the life of Jesus, but we need shrewdness too, hard-headed insight into the realities of our world.

And it isn't hopeless. Look at the astonishing success of the assault on youth unemployment since 1997. Or the measures to address under-achievement in inner city schools. Or the current government's response to the Jubilee 2000 campaign - where 80% of the support came from the churches - or Gordon

Brown's work on an international financing facility to tackle poverty in the developing world and deliver the international development targets. You can see in all those just the fusion of innocence with shrewdness - the application of a profound grasp of how the system works in order significantly to increase fairness - which Christian Socialism should be about.

One other point. I think if you look at that part of the archive which dates from the period when I joined CSM, you will find a rather unattractive picture. Much of what it said and published, under the leadership as I recall then of the Anglican clergyman, Edward Charles, was pretty incomprehensible to most people outside the CSM. It combined a rather exclusive kind of self-righteous socialism with a rather exclusive kind of theology with which very few church goers could identify. The number of people who could sign up to that combination of politics and theology was very small indeed. Material published by CSM would not, for example, have found a place on many church bookstalls. A friend of mine, David Hallam, the former Member of the European Parliament, tells that shortly after his conversion as an exuberant young Christian, he was looking forward eagerly to meeting people from the Christian Socialist Movement. When however he got to a meeting, they said to him *"Do you mean you are one of those people who have been born again. We would prefer it if they had not been born in the first place"*.

But again Christian Socialism does not have to be like that - and what we have seen since 1994 when Tony Blair became Labour Party leader is how Christian faith has been key to expressing the aspirations of the Labour Party in a popular way which has made sense to a remarkably broad range of people. Christian Socialism has given birth to a new and highly effective language of political change, and that has been a very important element in the political success of the present Government. Ideas like that of rights being matched by responsibilities, terms like the "New Deal" drawn from Bible ideas about new birth and renewal - these ideas drawn from faith have been key in the political success we have seen in the last six years. And let's not forget it has been success without precedent in our history - no British political party has had two landslides in a row before, and we shall shortly be the longest lasting Labour Government we have ever had.

So it is a privilege for me to be able to undertake this inauguration. I commend Sarum College in providing a home for it. I want to see it well used by students and scholars. I believe it does contain material for study which could be very fruitful for understanding an important part of the history of the Labour movement over the last forty years - but fruitful also for developing politics for the future which can deliver change for the better in the world conditions which lie ahead. Politics which will aim to do good in an effective way. This archive can help us understand better how we can in our political lives be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves, which is our calling.

Thank you.