

## **The Bible and Politics Bath University Chaplaincy 4<sup>th</sup> October 2001**

The events of last month have given a terrible twist to the links between faith and politics. But what I would like to do in speaking to you today is to reflect on our experience in Britain of the links specifically between the Bible and politics.

For some people the idea of the Bible having anything useful to say about politics is a very odd idea. But some people you might not expect are interested in the idea and I think we should value their support.

Last year I spent a week in and around San Francisco and one of the people I called on was Jerry Brown, Mayor of the City of Oakland which has very severe inner city problems and adjoins San Francisco. Jerry Brown is a very colourful character who was formerly Governor of California. He was married at one stage to Jane Fonda, was romantically linked at another period to Linda Ronstadt, and is renowned for taking idiosyncratic positions often far to the left of the US mainstream. Recently he has been in trouble for paying a visit to Fidel Castro in Cuba.

He told me of his despair at the dreadful state of the public school system in Oakland. One of his flagship projects is the establishment of a military school in the city. Children will wear uniform, the discipline will be military and by golly they will learn - unlike in the ordinary public schools! The Pentagon has promised \$2 million, the State of California will contribute. He said, though, that some of his left wing friends had some doubts about this project.

*"So", he said, "I just tell them, I asked Fidel about it and he thought it was a great idea, so what's the problem?"*

And so I am going to start my remarks about the Bible and politics by deferring to the Marxist historian Christopher Hill. Over the summer I have been reading his book, *"The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution"*. He concludes as a Marxist that the Bible did far more good than harm.

*"The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers", he says, "implying that all believers might interpret the Bible for themselves, could lead to relatively democratic notions, countering the traditional view that politics was a matter for the elite, the aristocracy and clergy only. Tyndale thought that a ploughman could understand the Scriptures as well as (or better than) many learned clerics. Was the implication that the ploughmen might be better at running the state [too]? ... The Bible in English helped men and women to think about society, to criticise its institutions, to question some of its values."*

For me, that is the heart of this. When people are exposed to the Bible, when they believe in Jesus Christ, they are changed, and when the changes in them start to have an impact on everybody else, then we start to see political and structural change for the better too. That is a process which I think is a very exciting one and I am encouraged to find a Marxist celebrating those changes too. He actually mentions two other parts of the world where there were comparable effects - south America, of course, through liberation theology, and also China, where apparently the most promising attempt at revolution against the Emperor in the mid-19th century was led by people who drew their inspiration from the Bible and Pilgrims Progress.

In Methodism in Britain, ordinary people in their communities came together in the chapels and discovered that they could succeed in positions of leadership which they had never aspired to before. They discovered from reading the Bible that those who had always claimed to be their betters were not in fact superior at all - as far as God was concerned, everybody was in the same boat. Their experience of faith changed their lives. Among the results were the labour movement and, after a few generations, just over 100 years ago, the Labour Party.

Graham Dale, the Director of the Christian Socialist Movement, has set out the forgotten story of the extent of the influence of Christian faith, in the establishment of the Labour Party. Many of the early leaders were church activists. Keir Hardie, the party's founding father, seems to have attended the campaigns associated with the American evangelist Dwight Moody in Glasgow and Edinburgh in the mid-1870s, and wrote in his diary in 1877, aged 21, "*Today I have given my life to Jesus Christ*". Hardie joined the Evangelical Union. Towards the end of his life, in 1910, he wrote: "*The impetus which drove me first of all into the Labour movement and the inspiration which carried me on in it, has been derived more from the teachings of Jesus Christ than all other sources combined*". Of Arthur Henderson, the party leader during World War I, it was said by his brother that "*For Arthur, life began with conversion. Before that, he was just an ordinary boy*". Philip Snowden, Labour's first Chancellor, wrote regularly about faith and politics, asserting that "*personal salvation and social salvation are like two palm trees which bear no fruit unless they grow side by side*".

I want to argue today that we are going to see something rather similar happening again - that people's experience in churches and the changes brought about in their lives when they start to follow Jesus Christ will again be a major influence in the development of structures and policies. That may seem a hopelessly naïve claim to make at a time when gleeful reports appear in the papers every few months that church attendance has plummeted again. But I believe it is going to be the case and I want to explain today why I believe it. Whatever is happening to official attendance figures, it is clear that church commitment and engagement in social action, church financial giving - all of these are sharply on the rise.

## **Jubilee 2000**

Take the remarkable impact of the Jubilee 2000 campaign. It is extraordinary to see how that campaign has been taken up right across the spectrum of the churches. From the black churches in my part of London to the noticeboards of churches in some of the most affluent parts of the country, Jubilee 2000 has been there. Something pretty remarkable has happened.

Of course, Jubilee 2000 has not been an exclusively church campaign. It has won very wide support, and that has been one of its glories. But the fact is that 80% of those who have participated in those human chains and sent in those Jubilee 2000 postcards with one pound coins sellotaped to the back of them - 80% of them were from the churches. It is from the churches that the campaign has derived its energy and its vigour. There has been nothing like it since the campaign against the slave trade.

As a Treasury Minister from 1999 until earlier this year, I was among those on the receiving end of the campaign. Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was quite clear that it had been the campaign which had changed public opinion, making it possible for him to introduce substantial debt relief. It

has been a decisive intervention with many of the characteristics of the anti-slavery campaign of 200 years ago.

Will Hutton reflected on all of this in an article in the Observer:

*"At the end of an increasingly secular century," he wrote, "it has been the biblical proof and moral imagination of religion that have torched the principles of the hitherto unassailable citadels of international finance - and opened the way to a radicalism about capitalism whose ramifications are not yet fully understood. - There is the moral basis for a new social settlement. The Left of Centre should take note; it is no longer Morris, Keynes and Beveridge who inspire and change the world - it's Leviticus."*

Another example which is different but I think also very telling is the fact that every big supermarket now stocks fair trade coffee. The fair trade movement came very largely out of Tear Fund which established Tearcraft which became Traidcraft - and it got its break because hundreds of volunteers were willing to sell their products on church stalls without being paid for their work. Traidcraft generates two million days employment per year in the developing world last year, supporting tens of thousands of workers and their dependents. And now that coffee is in every big supermarket and there is a 'Fair Trade' mark on a range of products, and those are all making a difference - and it has been the commitment, the willingness to get involved, of many hundreds of church people that has brought about that significant change in our consumer marketplace, for the benefit of hundreds of thousands overseas. The willingness of believers in Jesus to get involved in Britain with politics and structures is making a difference today in new ways and with a freshness in its impact which is new and in my view extremely significant.

I discussed all this a few times with my boss, Gordon Brown. He suggested I should have a look at a book edited by the American Roman Catholic journalist E J Dionne, called 'Community Works' and published by the very prestigious US think tank, the Brookings Institution. So, as tended to be the case when Gordon told me to do something, I did it. It provides a fascinating account of the impact on some of the most unpromising situations of church based initiatives in the US.

The subtitle in the book is "The Revival of Civil Society in America", and that is what it is about - how it has been possible to revive community in places where it had all but disappeared, and how rebuilding those bonds of trust and mutual dependence has proved to be really effective in bringing new hope to people in areas where hope has for some time been in short supply. And at point after point, the book makes it clear that it has been the churches which have been the key agents for these changes for the better.

One of the essays starts like this:

*"In a leaky, drafty hall on Milwaukee's northwest side, Pastor Gerald Saffold is busy rebuilding civil society. Of course, that's not how he would describe what he's doing. He would say that he's bringing souls to Christ - using his gift for music to draw inner city teens into his "Unity in the Community" Choir, where former gang leaders and drug dealers help him write the songs and choreograph the dances they then perform all over the city. Nonetheless, here is an unmistakable act of civic renewal, and under the least hospitable circumstances imaginable. Where before there were inner-city gangs of radically alienated, angry teens, there is emerging today a cohesive community, united in common endeavour, mutually developing skills of cooperation, leadership and citizenship."*

Another of the essays quotes a pentecostal minister in Boston about the moment he understood what he and the churches had to do to address escalating youth violence in his city.

*"Nearing exhaustion", he said "we asked this major local dealer, 'Man, why did we lose you? Why are we losing other kids now?' He stares us in the eye and says, 'I'm there, you're not. When the kids go to school, I'm there, you're not. When the boy goes for a loaf of bread or wants a pair of sneakers or just somebody older to talk to or feel safe and strong around, I'm there, you're not. I'm there, you're not; I win, you lose."*

E J Dionne has a more recent book of essays on this topic which arises from some seminars conducted by the Brookings Institution in which one of the key participants was Joseph Lieberman who was Al Gore's running mate in the US presidential election last year. It makes the point that in looking at the effectiveness of faith based welfare institutions, *"the more spiritually demanding programs appear to produce the best results."* It makes this point, that *"Citizens who for whatever reasons are nervous about religion or enhanced church-state partnerships should focus on the consistent finding that faith-based outreach efforts benefit poor unchurched neighbourhood children most of all"*. It says that *"Multiple studies identify religion as a key variable in escaping the inner city, recovering from alcohol and drug addiction, keeping marriages together and staying out of prison"*.

Within the UK context the think tank Demos has maintained that *"much of the best innovation in the provision of local health, homelessness, community regeneration and drug related services is now being shaped by people with strong religious beliefs"*. I think they are right.

I want to make three major points about what is happening in the UK:

- First, that there is in Britain today an important social movement - a new Christian activism which deserves to be taken seriously. This is the point on which I want to spend most time.
- Second, that this Government needs to work with this new Christian activism, in order to maximise the effectiveness of our work in tackling social exclusion.
- And third, that the churches equally can benefit from taking advantage of this Government's framework for work on social exclusion.

In tackling social exclusion, there is common ground between the Labour Party, this Government and the churches. There is scope for partnership between us. I want to see that potential realised. I believe it is in the interests of our churches, and of our country and its people, that that potential should be realised.

### **The new Christian activism**

Let me begin, then, with this new Christian activism in our communities. I think we can distinguish a number of the features of this activism:

- First, that it is a grassroots movement. It doesn't have a centre or a cathedral, but it is making itself felt across the country. It is largely about unhistoric acts and hidden lives.
- Second, that it is locally focused. It is rooted in a committed mutual community - a church - which is socially and culturally mixed, able to enlist people to move across the boundaries of their comfort zone.

- Third, that it is rooted in worship. It does not consist of activists who happen to have had some background in Christianity. Rather it has right at its centre the person of Jesus Christ, and the activity of worship. That conveys to it vitality, energy and commitment.
- Fourth, that it is interested in changing individuals. It plugs away, it doesn't abandon failures even if it looks foolish. It has a profound vision of what it means to be human, in faith that the ultimate destination of human history is in God's hands and that at that time, what is so plainly wrong today will be put right.

Those are the lessons I have drawn from the visits I have made to a range of church based projects over the past couple of years. Earlier this year I visited Walsall and was struck by the range of new social ventures being undertaken by the churches there:

- The Vine, a young people's drop in working among young people excluded from school, in collaboration with the local council and further education college, set up initially on the initiative of the then Anglican rector
- First Base, providing supported housing for homeless young people, initiated by Walsall Evangelistic Centre
- the Carpenters' Shop which recycles furniture, providing training for young people on carpentry and work for asylum seekers
- the Walsall Street Team which works among young prostitutes and drug abusers, with support from the local authority - a project of Walsall Community Church
- Stepping Stones, a 24 hour domestic abuse helpline run by volunteers from a number of churches
- The Lighthouse, a new project of black churches in Walsall, providing training for information technology skills with public funding.

Walsall is not unique. It exemplifies a new determination on the part of local churches to engage with the social problems of their communities, and a new willingness to work to change things for the better.

All those projects, and many more like them, are driven from the grassroots, locally focused, rooted in worship and committed to changing individuals.

And that is what I see as the dynamic basis for this new political involvement. It comes out of our experience in hard pressed communities and our desire to change things for our friends who live there. Its not come out of theory but out of our experience.

### **Along the Barking Road: Christian activism renewed**

A little while ago, the Newham branch of the Christian Socialist Movement went on a prayer walk along the Barking Road through Newham. We started at Rathbone Market in Canning Town and the organiser told how many churches had been in the vicinity 60 years ago. Most had been bombed and nobody had ever bothered to rebuild them. Others had been sold and bulldozed after their congregations dwindled. Further along we knew there was a large Baptist chapel which had been converted in the 1940s into a warehouse with a shop on the front selling tea towels and pillow cases. It looked like a depressing picture of decline and for many years it was.

But as we walked along we saw that something new was happening. It was the shop names which showed it first - we came to the *Amazing Grace Mini Mart*, *Signs and Wonders Hairstylists* and *Redeem Travels*. Somebody claimed to have

spotted *Washed in the Blood Launderette* but I think they were having us on! Then we came to that disused Baptist chapel - and we saw that now the tea towel shop had closed down and after over 50 years it has been converted back into a church again. It is the Glory Bible Church and it is bursting at the seams every Sunday. 200 yards away is another Baptist church - apparently one of the fastest growing in Europe.

And what's happened? Well many of the African people who have moved to Newham - in many cases fled from their home countries - are committed Christians. For others, the trauma of the move has revived their faith or caused them to consider the gospel seriously afresh. Now they want to celebrate and they are injecting a huge new surge of worship into the area. And it isn't just the newly arrived - the evidence is that the indigenous population is going to church much more than ten years ago as well. Older churches are providing night shelters for the homeless, Sunday meals for people living alone, English classes, counselling services, and many share their premises with other language congregations. In my constituency, the biggest congregation is Tamil speaking, with people who came from Sri Lanka for asylum.

So what we found was not a picture of decline, but of growth. We are going to have much more exposure to Christian activism in the future, I believe, than we have done in the recent past.

Thank you for inviting me along today. I am keen that young people who are seeking to build their lives on following Jesus should work out what that means for politics. It is an exciting time to be doing that today and I wish you well.

***Thank you.***