

# **Culture, Christianity and Human Flourishing**

**Address to the University of Wales, Swansea Theology Society  
Wednesday 18 February 2004**

I am delighted to be with you this evening for this lecture. I am especially delighted to be in Wales. I don't get here often enough. So when invited to come and talk to you this evening I jumped at the chance. You will know what I mean when I recall writing to congratulate Rowan Williams on his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury 'Don't forget' says I "We Celts must stick together!"

But there's another reason why I am pleased to be with you this evening. At the risk of alienating half the audience, it's because this is a university and I am hoping that there will be plenty of young people in the audience. There is a theory doing the rounds which says that young people aren't interested any longer in the Church, in meeting archbishops, or in talking about the deepest things in life. Well if that is really the case my experience must be the exception that proves the rule. I try and make time to meet the young people of my diocese on a regular basis - about once a month in fact. If those meetings are anything to go by the theorists may need to think again.

Suffice to say that the young men and women I have the pleasure to meet and to listen to, have a great deal to say that is profound and moving, generous and life-giving. And they don't let me off the hook - so things can be lively too.

I hope this evening we will be the same and that there will be plenty of two-way traffic.

As is often the case when I am asked to give a talk the topic is left to me. I sometimes think it would be much easier to be given a title and told to go away and to speak to it. I hope that our subject for this evening is something in which we all take a genuine and personal interest. The title of this talk is Culture, Christianity and Human Flourishing. But I think we can simplify that. The question we are asking ourselves this evening, a question that we all ask ourselves, in one form or another, every day, is: "How do I, how do we, live lives that are fulfilling, that lead to happiness, and that are in accordance with our human nature?"

On Monday I attended a conference at the Treasury in London looking at new initiatives to combat global poverty. If the eradication of poverty is the greatest challenge facing the global community, the question of what it means to be human and to live the fullness of human life as God intends that we should, is perhaps the most important challenge for each of us individually, and also for the whole of our society and its prevailing culture or cultures.

And for those who are actively engaged with young people - in education, in intellectual and spiritual formation, and in family and community life the question takes on an added urgency. Assuming that the young people to whom we relate, and with whom we are engaged in dialogue and in the exploration of the deepest questions are to assume responsible positions in our world, how I wonder do we expect them in their thoughts, their discourse and their actions to contribute not only to their own happiness, but to the flourishing of our society and of our culture?

Let me say straight away that as Christians we need to cultivate a careful and a sensitive regard for the culture of which we are part. Not least because it is from within that culture that we, like the apostles two thousand years ago are called to witness to, and to proclaim, our Christian faith. It is not from outside or apart from the world that we live as Christians, it is from within. Our culture, our Christianity and our human flourishing are all therefore intimately connected.

So I thought I would divide my talk into three parts. First I want to take a look at contemporary culture, and question how it feels to be part of it - in particular for younger people who are more exposed to many of its challenges and dangers. Then I want to reflect on the living tradition of the Christian faith and to ask what it is that we can and should learn from that living tradition in the context of our culture. What is it that Christianity is saying to us about human flourishing in the 21st century? And finally I want to suggest a few practical steps we can take to apply that wisdom to our lives so that we flourish as people at the deepest level. With flourishing comes happiness.

So let's begin by looking at the contemporary situation and let me outline a few aspects of our culture that strike me forcibly. Now not all of you will agree with my assessment for it is inevitably rather a personal one, but bear with me.

The first thing that strikes me when I stand back a little is something I call 'emotivism', By which I mean the growing assumption, understanding, belief - I am not exactly sure which it is - that morality consists not of judgments about what is, or is not, objectively right or wrong, but in what my feelings tell me at any given moment is or isn't right or wrong. It is extraordinary how many people, and young people particularly, feel that right and wrong are determined by one's feelings and emotions. There is an entirely personal account of truth - right and wrong - that may take little or no account of objective reality and morality. I remember my predecessor, Cardinal Hume, telling about a conversation with a young person. They were discussing "objective norms of morality". Or at least he thought they were until the conversation came to an end with a final aside: 'Well, that's only your view, isn't it!' Well I don't think it is just a personal view. Quite the opposite in fact. So we do have to ask ourselves whether or not there is such a thing as an objective norm of reality - objective definitions of right and wrong, which apply to everyone, and which are somehow imbued in our nature, a law that is written in our very being by the Creator. We have to ask ourselves this question because the answer has enormous significance for how we live and how we approach our faith and the art of living, and living happily.

A second aspect of our culture that would hardly escape the attention of a newcomer to it is a pervasive spirit of 'consumerism' from which it is hard to escape. On a recent outing to the supermarket I found myself the object of a certain incredulity as I queued at the check-out with the two items I needed, and had come to buy. It was as though I was somehow missing the point. I hope the point isn't some sort of 21st century equivalent of Descartes' "I think therefore I am" - "I shop therefore I am" . The evidence of people's shopping trolleys makes one wonder. We don't appear to shop any more on the basis of need, so much as desire. The trouble with desire, if we cannot keep it in proportion is that we end up defining ourselves, and others, in relation to what we have, and they have, and not who we are. Possessions become the object of value rather than the human person. But can there really be any logic to the notion that the more you have, the better you are, and vice versa. Aren't we back to the logic of desires and feelings again? The evidence seems in fact to suggest the contrary. The more we have the less happy we seem to be. In which case more is not really more at all. More may really be, less.

My third observation is that our society focuses a lot on the individual and on his or her rights and on personal autonomy, and correspondingly less on society and the common good. On one level I think it is right for there to be an interest in and focus on the individual because we are all unique. And each of us has an essential and innate dignity which comes from being human. So every person has rights and a dignity which is to be respected. However human history shows very clearly that we do not exist, let alone flourish, in isolation from each other. We are all part of something much bigger than ourselves. We all begin as part of a family and as we develop we experience life as a member of a group, of our local community, and of society. Which means that our rights as individuals cannot be seen in isolation any more than we can. They have also to be seen in relation to, and not over and above, the needs of the communities of which we are part. This is something we begin to learn at home. The idea of a "me, me, me culture" is a contradiction in terms!

Another focus, some would argue almost an obsession, particularly of the media in our society is sex. Now that has something to do with a much greater openness about matters sexual than in times past, and that is mostly a very good thing. However it would be interesting to analyse the context, and content, of the sex which we see on our screens, and which dominates so much modern advertising, and which is used to sell magazines and newspapers. I suspect that more often than not there is no real context. Sex is presented as something which has no real significance. Love is hardly even mentioned. Commitment is measured in attachments of weeks, not lifetimes, and so forth. And if the mass media trivialises sex, it is only a matter of time before our society as a whole loses touch with the true meaning and wonder of sex. Sex divorced from love, from commitment, from fidelity, and from the desire to have children is a trivialisation of something profound and extraordinarily important. Presented in this way it also represents a danger to the future health and happiness of our children. We are even confused about how to approach the subject of sex in our schools. We confuse the provision of information about sexual activity, contraception, same sex relationships and so forth with formation. We are not doing enough to prepare young people for life-long stable relationships and, ultimately, for marriage. Which is strange considering this is what most people

aspire to. 89% of young people interviewed in a recent survey said that what they wanted ultimately was to have a stable marriage.

I think the media have got it wrong. Sex is not more important to us and to our children than the truth about relationships, and the real meaning of love and commitment. In the market place it would appear that sex sells. But in our culture there is much more at stake than the size of the magazine market, or the health of the advertising industry. I believe that the breakdown in family life, the increase of divorce, the ease with which sexual relationships become 'passing' and peripheral, is in danger of inflicting very real and long-lasting damage on our society. The cement which holds society together is family life. Stable families are made and sustained by loving, unselfish and mature relationships. A failure to recognise this simple fact could prove fundamentally destabilising to our culture.

Finally I am struck by a growing sense in our culture that we have the right to a risk-free existence. Some risks are real, if regrettable. It is understandable for example that parents are often afraid to let their children go out and play, fearing for their safety. But sometimes we let our aversion to risk take us to unhelpful extremes. We could all think of examples. Doctors, teachers and social workers live in constant fear of accusations of malpractice and the risk of litigation. And the corollary of our aversion to risk is a willingness to find someone to blame. Everything which goes wrong has to be someone else's fault - heads must roll; compensation must be paid. But there is an even greater danger that we end up running away from reality, and that we lose our freedom and our courage in the process. We might end up with a wonderfully regulated environment where every risk is avoided, but what would be the point if in the process we have lost our fundamental freedom, and the dignity and the spontaneity which goes with it? If we cannot face risk, and the possibility of failure, we would never commit to a relationship. And that would have the most profound implications for our capacity to live lives of faith, of commitment. Is this why some fear marriage, priesthood and the religious life?

I am conscious that this may all sound rather negative. I do not mean it to be. Because in fact I think our culture is actually much richer and truer than all this would suggest. In a media dominated age we inevitably have to look a little deeper to find the traces of our human flourishing. To return to the remarks I made at the beginning, I detect in my conversations with young people - and young in Westminster diocese seems to mean anything from 14 to 40!! and I'm sure the same is true in Menevia and Cardiff - I detect a deep yearning for meaning, and for a sense of purpose. Perhaps even deeper than might have been the norm 30 years ago. And for many young people this also means a strong desire to serve others in a very self-sacrificial way. Which makes me think that young people are not taken in by our consumer culture, or by the trivialisation of sex, or an increased aversion to taking risks. As human persons they remain centred on the search for meaningful relationships, for truth, and for love. And usually, perhaps unsurprisingly, their deepest desire is to marry and have a family.

Generally the central issue of importance for discussion is not sport, hobbies or holidays, but marriage, children and family. Yes - they enjoy the "good things of life" but they are also seeking things that have a more permanent value. If they are in pursuit of something it is happiness, rather than fun - which isn't to suggest the two don't go together. It's just that the order in which you seek them makes all the difference!! In my experience young people today, although they may not be overtly Christian or attend any Church, understand and value the spiritual dimension of their lives, because they recognise that that is how we are created. They begin to understand that being fully human means showing the need for stability and love in a secure environment, which is perfected in the family. Certain conditions are necessary to be able to develop one's gifts - these are some of them and they would be easy to miss if you only believed what you read in the newspapers!! I find that young people today are very caring about the deep things of life, about their friendships, about their commitments, about their families. Far from it being an irreligious society, ours seems to be a society that is genuinely searching for meaning and for hope, searching - if you like - for God.

So let's look to see what it is that the Christian tradition can teach us about human flourishing, about the meaning and hope of life and how we should live.

I think first, and perhaps foremost, our tradition introduces us to the idea that our human flourishing is intimately connected to the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is in the incarnation that we discover most profoundly the meaning and purpose of our own lives. For countless millions of people over the last two thousand years, Jesus Christ has been the model of self-sacrificial love. His gift of Himself on the cross is

for us the ultimate sign and symbol of God's complete love for each one of us. So it is Christ that we imitate; his love that we strive to emulate.

We often call ourselves Christians, or Catholics, or just followers of Jesus, but I like the word 'disciple'. A disciple is quite simply someone who follows - and we follow Jesus. At a time when there is so much emphasis on role models, on different aspects of leadership, and on competition as the means to the end of personal fulfilment, there is something dramatic in the idea of follower-ship, imitation, witness. At the heart of our historical community there have been, and there are today, countless examples of what it means to live an integrated and meaningful life as a disciple of Jesus, and a witness to the truth that it is in Him that we find our deepest contentment and our human flourishing. So let us not forget the power of this witness. For myself I think, for example, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa or Leonard Cheshire.

But we should think too of examples nearer to home. We have all been inspired in our faith by others whose commitment has impressed us, often in quiet and unspoken ways: a close personal friend perhaps, or a teacher or someone in our local community. I remember when I was first a bishop I used to have an annual gathering of people and families with special needs. We were usually about 500 or so gathered in the field behind my house. After Mass there would be a party and dancing. And I remember one man, I think he was a bank manager, who every year would come with his only daughter. His wife was in a mental hospital, and his daughter had special needs. One year I found myself transfixed by the look on his face as he danced with his daughter. You know, I have never seen on a man's face such a look of sorrow, of love, and of tenderness all rolled into one. Great suffering and great love were etched most beautifully in his face, inextricably bound together. When I was asked to talk last year about the human face of God it was his face that first came to mind. Here was more than a mere hint of the Incarnation - the compassion, love and suffering of our Lord.

It seems to me, that if we look intently enough we can see the life of Christ re-written in the lives of ordinary people like you and me, and the truth of the Gospel begins to shine with much greater clarity. Most of us owe a debt of gratitude to those who by their living, their conscious or unconscious imitation of Christ witness to what He and His cross, borne out of love, means for them. This is part of the beauty, the power and the mystery of the Incarnation.

The Christian religion reveals God, the God of Jesus, not as a lonely God but as a God who is Trinity, the love of Father for Son expressed in the Holy Spirit. The God that we worship is One Who is Himself a community of life and love. That we human beings are made in His image and likeness, this God who is a community of love, means that we too are made for love. We are made by God precisely to love Him and to love each other. And Jesus is the way that we follow in the journey into full communion and community. If we live in a relationship of love with others, then we discover what it means to be in solidarity with them. And that discovery, it seems to me, is the heart of what I mean when I speak of human flourishing - summed up for me in the parable of the Good Samaritan. And if you want a contemporary example of that parable look at some of the young (and not so young) people caring for others on pilgrimage to Lourdes.

Looking at the world through Christian eyes means seeing more than we otherwise might. Seen with eyes of faith the world is deeper and richer. It has added dimensions. It is not limited to what we see around us. It is charged with hidden beauty, truth and meaning which we sometimes see but dimly "as in a glass darkly". But the draw of that truth and meaning becomes irresistible.

So when we look around at our world, in seeing more, more is demanded of us in return. We look, we see and we respond. We begin to see the real connection between the circumstances of our own lives, and the life of Christ. The scriptures start to come alive in new ways. We are challenged in ways we had not expected, and we find food for our journey where previously we might have found none.

Scripture should provide another dimension to our lives and a guide for our living. We look at Christ in His birth, and see how God willed that He should become just like us in the humility and weakness of Bethlehem. We look at His teaching in the Gospels and how he reached out to the marginalized and the poor. We remember that he washed His disciples' feet and showed them an example of loving service. We recall his response to the woman caught in adultery - his compassion and forgiveness which freed her to begin a new life. Time and time again, as we read the gospel story, we are comforted and strengthened.

In our discipleship it is the strength and the power of Christ that draws us on. It is He Who gives us meaning and hope; who teaches us how to live. We are followers of the Way of Christ and it is He who gives us the hope of eternal life and who teaches us in the Beatitudes the real meaning of happiness: Happy are the poor in spirit, theirs is the Kingdom of God etc. Or the last judgment, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, or naked or in prison. And Jesus says, In as much as you did it to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.

Ultimately, what Jesus shows us is that only in striving for what is true and good that we become free people. We may be faced with limitless choice but much of that choice is illusory. Freedom to choose is not the same as licence to do what we will. False choices imprison us. Only the truth makes us free. And truth and right are the same. So our freedom is the freedom to choose life and flourishing and sometimes those choices are hard.

In fact so hard that they might even be called acts of resistance. We are called, as I said at the beginning, to live purposefully at the heart of our world, and not somewhere out on the periphery. Christ calls us to live and to flourish within our culture and not apart from it. This is a liberating experience, but it cannot be achieved without what the Benedictines call "conversio mores" - conversion of the heart. We live as émigrés within. So when our conscience calls us from within the tradition of our faith, from within our love of scripture to say no to one or other of the prevailing mores of our times we have to be true to that calling - we must not be afraid of acts of resistance which speak truth to our world. I think again of Romero. But I also think of the young men and women who put faithful, chaste relationships before casual, cast-away acquaintance. And I think of our elected representatives who put their conscience first, before party allegiance in matters of faith and morals.

I want to end, if I may with a few practical suggestions as to how we might bolster our efforts to witness to the Christian vision of human flourishing in our culture.

My first suggestion is to think of going on pilgrimage with some other people. I have already mentioned Lourdes, but there are also other places, like Rome, or Fatima, or Compostella in Spain. You can of course go on pilgrimage alone, but it seems to me that you learn much more when you go with other people. When you go in a group and are walking together and doing things for others together, you find out much more about yourself and what makes you truly happy. Strange perhaps but you only begin to know who you are when you sacrifice yourself for others. I remember going with a group of Anglican and Catholic young people to Taize. There were about five thousand of them, all sitting quietly, praying, chanting, listening to the Word of God in scripture, and coming away, profoundly moved and strengthened by power of the Spirit working in and through them. I do think that the journey we embark on with others to another place can be symbolic of that deeper journey each of us has to make - the journey of personal discovery to find out who we really are. And we derive great strength and insight by journeying with others. The same is true of life in community. I think for example of L'Arche which was founded to look after people with learning difficulties. We know from Jean Vanier's writings that the people who share their lives with these men and women learn more from them than they would from anything else. So think about the place of pilgrimage or of the experience of community in your life. Look for other young men and women with whom it is quite natural to talk, in a quiet way, about yourselves, about your lives, about your hopes. Don't be afraid to do so.

My second suggestion is to remember to pray. Sometimes we have been brought up to believe that our God is a God 'out there somewhere', and we lose sight of Him. But God is not only what we call 'transcendent'. God is also 'imminent' - the God who dwells by the power of His Spirit within each one of us. I saw a poll recently which suggested that in our country, which deems itself so agnostic about belief in God, over 70% said they prayed regularly. There is no substitute for daily prayer. There is no substitute for prayer with others. The greatest prayer is, of course, the prayer of the liturgy, and especially the Holy Eucharist, the Mass. In prayer we discover that we are loved and cherished by the God who made us and that what he wants for us is our happiness.

The final thing I want to say is that people are convinced more by witnesses, than by teachers. It is part of my mission to see that all who want to be are formed in their faith, in the teachings of Christ and of the Church. But I also realise that words are not enough - we inform and influence others by our example. Parents give more to their children by the example of their love and sacrifice and faith than they ever do by the words that they use. And young people tend to underestimate the influence they have on their peers by the way they act. And we become more effective witnesses to Jesus Christ not so much by knowing all

about him, but by coming actually to know him personally. He is the Founder of our faith, yes, but by His Holy Spirit, He still lives in us, in His People, which we call the Church.

If we needed to know how to go back to basics, I don't think there could be any better advice, than to turn once more to His face. British culture is tinged with cynicism. People want to know that things are genuine, that they are not 'spin'. Contemporary culture feeds on images, but more and more people want to be assured that the image is not merely a façade. They want to be sure that there is substance before they commit themselves. Pope John Paul has recently described Europe as a place where there has been a 'dimming of hope, because Europe has lost sight of its Christian memory and heritage'. John Paul II is convinced people have an irrepressible yearning for hope. He values the witness of ordinary people, particularly of martyrs, which is why perhaps he has canonised so many. And if you ask what is the core of the Martyrs life it is that he or she has sought to show the living face of Jesus Christ.

So don't be discouraged by tales of woe you read in the newspapers, or the critiques that are made on the Christian faith or on the Catholic Church or, indeed, on other Churches. It has always been so. The question is, 'Is it true?' Is Jesus Christ the Son of God? Did He teach us how to live? Did He give us hope? Is He present by His Spirit in our world today? Is He always going to be with His Church, offering consolation and meaning for each and every one of His followers? Is he present in my, and your life, here and now, today? The answer is, Yes, and it is why we need never fear.

Let me end with part of a rule for a Brother or Sister of Jesus Christ: It finishes with this exhortation: Set out on the road, together with your brothers and sisters, together with the numberless people of God, all pilgrims travelling to the Father's house. Go on your way singing, a song of hope on your lips and your heart burning within you. Now we have the Alleluias of the journey but soon there will be the Alleluias of consummation of the great Sabbath with God. Now you are being sown in the darkness of the earth but when that day comes you will bloom in the light and warmth of God's eternity. Sister, Brother, set out on the road and peace be with you forever.

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