

Days Of Judgment

I read an extremely sharp article warning the Church that it had totally lost its footing in the last couple of centuries: from being a major formative influence in history, it has secluded itself and lost its nose for the meaning of what is happening around it. This helplessness showed itself in the engulfing of the Continental church by Fascism, by the complete failure of the Church in relation to Communism, and now in the most massive crisis of all: the oncoming moment when our greed and waste will destroy our planet's life-support, and human society itself will come crashing to its death.

I stepped out into the yard, and sniffed the ever-present miasma of petrol surrounding my awful house: and I saw four cars standing outside the gate, nose-to-tail, halted, pouring out fumes, each one with a single driver; more of the same were pouring past on the far side of the street, and behind me in my garage was a large car in which, later today, I shall make several journeys, all alone. Then I saw a bus lumbering to a halt amid the traffic: a fifty-two seater, with one passenger.

My author was deeply concerned in the cosmic physical realities - the destruction of rain-forest and sea-stocks, the erosion of energy-resources, the onset of global warming, the increasing rebellion of wind and water, the outbreak of plagues - and the implication that what we are confronting is a set of ignored physical abuses which, together, constitute a criminal damage of our future hopes of survival.

In the area where I work, the area of community-building and spiritual life, it may seem that there is increasingly little relevance. But take a look at what is happening here. Here too, people have abandoned their concepts of community in favour of self-fulfilment, throwing over their sense of belonging and obedience to one another: they readily divorce, setting their individual agenda above their promise to belong; they abandon their dearest ties in favour of the individual autonomy they once gladly laid down for love. They drive away, alone in a five-seater vehicle. They abandon that signal point where once they assembled weekly before God, to search *together* for the meaning that binds us; and now it is every man for himself, reinventing a personal wheel that will give my meaning to my life. The myth of the private chapel (*I have my own way of praying, which is personal*) and the personal morality (*I'm not religious, but I'm as good as them that are*) have rendered otiose the common Church..

The Beeb brought a great and good personage to our church to talk to me about funerals. I'd sounded off in our bulletin about the sad sight of whole lapsed families trying to remember how to behave in church, and wondered where the younger members of these clans would take the elder ones to be buried, in twenty years, when the Church has been closed and there are no priests. My interviewer perhaps thought I was totally self-concerned, worried for my job. He couldn't see that a world where the bottom line is always oneself can't survive. His attitude to funerals was a little like that of a consumer, wanting the most attractive deal.

The Christian funeral depends on the existence of community which is based on communion, the sharing of life at the deepest level. It depends for its eloquence on people who have merged their individual fate with each other, who develop shared language, shared musical

language, shared experience of prayer, all expressed in bodily form and invested with love and fidelity. You might get one of that community to sit beside a stranger, and help him to find his way. But you can't drum it all up to order out of nothing, as a transient experience for transient individuals, like customers in a theme-park. Some things, it seems, money can't buy. When the last generation of punters has finally forgotten the words of the Lord's Prayer, and how to sing *Crimond* and *Abide With Me*, the unadorned Crem will be the only option, beautified with whatever someone might find to say, with piped Daniel O'Donnell or Glenn Miller, followed by a quick snort at the local. That will be the liturgy for which thousands have quietly opted, voting with their feet, members of a money-based humanity that has been bought at one end of the street, and sold at the other.

The anti-crusade for secularism, atheism, and individualism may try to focus our minds on this world and make us take seriously what happens here, by telling us *This is all there is: forget heaven, and take care of earth*. But I see no sign of atheism gathering communities of generous sharing, providing resonant space for the celebration of life or the enshrining of grief, or offering poetry and wisdom with which to endure bereavement and sorrow.

The problems of the ecosystem are locked up in exactly the same safe as human community: there's no commercial power that wants to sustain them. Which oil executive will invest in less cars? Which supermarket king will campaign for less conspicuous consumption? What commercial interest will distract people from the ever-increasing comfort and luxury of their privacy, to point them towards the sharing that might save the lonely, the deranged, the simply poor? When thousands interest themselves in the lifestyle of soccer stars, who will want to hear about Francis of Assisi? What country will respond to the call to simplicity and sobriety, when goodness of life is so exactly measured by expenditure? And there is no salvation in politics, while ever politics dances to the interests of multinational business. We need communion, justice, wisdom, and sacrifice. What politician will risk his power at a General Election on a platform made up of these things?

Our leaders must look to the issues of ecology, and offer leadership not only to their flock, but to the world, from their *episkope*, which is a higher view than that of a politician or a multinational. But the average parish must look to its Christian values, to the priorities in its schools, to the liturgy it celebrates, to the quality of its communication, its community, its communion. Great values are at risk. While we can still see them, we must be active in their defence.