

Thank God Our Time Is Now

Cardinal Basil Hume

The search for God of necessity entails a commitment to the Kingdom and its values. That Kingdom is a present and future reality. Out of our fumbblings and failures, our confusion and darkness, our dreams and ceaseless striving, the Lord of history reveals his kingdom among us and brings to pass his purposes .

Inevitably the process involves repeated death and resurrection. When everything seems lost and darkness reigns, the power of God is most clearly manifested in our weakness.

The Church, we know, has no political agenda. It has, however, a divine mission to proclaim the Kingdom, witness to its values, be a sign and source of universal reconciliation and human renewal. The Church and its members must be a prophetic voice in society. We must seek always to discern the signs of the time and be agents of constructive change at every level. Experience, however teaches us that members of the Church may not speak with one voice for the way ahead is sometimes unclear.

The Church's mission is both universal and particular. There is a global responsibility as well as one which is national and continental. The concern for our immediate country and its neighbours must never for instance blind us to the needs of the Southern hemisphere. To the best of our ability we must keep alive in our continent the sense that solidarity, interdependence and practical concern embrace the whole planet. In this connection I would remind you of what the Holy Father wrote in his most recent Encyclical *Centesimus Annus* concerning the universal destination of the goods of creation, both material and spiritual.

Europe itself, however, has before it a unique opportunity for rebirth and renewal and, at the same time, the possibility of acute disorder and immense danger. The frozen truce of the Cold War appears in retrospect to have provided a certain precarious stability. In the East the peaceful revolution of 1989, the present political storms buffeting the Soviet Union, the mounting threat of civil war in Yugoslavia are taking us into uncharted waters. There is also the ever-present danger that nuclear stockpiles may fall into the hands of new political groupings with unpredictable consequences. Yet there is in the air the scent of liberty, a longing for democracy and decent government, and the belief that better times lie ahead.

In the West the movement towards greater unity, prosperity and secure

peace seems now irreversible. But while there is every outward sign of success and progress the inner crisis remains. The plural society slides easily into confusion and incoherence. There is no agreement on the fundamental values which should underpin society. The prevailing unbelief and cynicism have left us without heroes, without illusions and with no vision to inspire.

The East after decades of lies, cruelty, poverty and oppression looks to the West for political models and economic expertise. It will look alas in vain for values and vision. Both halves of our European family in the East and the West for different reasons have largely lost their souls and suffer an inner emptiness and loss of spiritual vitality. This presents us with an inescapable challenge and opportunity. The Church's response needs to go to the very heart of the divine mystery we profess. I am reminded of those words of Christopher Fry:

Dark and cold we may be, but this is no winter now.
The frozen misery of centuries, breaks, cracks, begins to move;
The thunder is the thunder of the floes,
The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.
Thank God our time is now when wrong comes up to face us
everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take the longest stride of soul men ever
took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise is exploration into God.

(A Sleep of Prisoners)

Europe is now clearly a continent in search of identity, meaning and purpose. State communism is now being consigned shamefacedly to the scrapheap as a grotesque and inhuman failure. Liberal capitalism successfully meets many material needs but is extravagant in its use of irreplaceable resources and has little to say to the human spirit. The peoples of Europe may well seek in religion and nationalism the answer to their deeper needs. But only a more spiritual, contemplative, truly renewed faith will save Europe's soul

The Kingdom of God needs to be manifested first and foremost in the lives of individuals and in their immediate relationships. Here is the rich soil in which the seed of God's word is to be patiently sown. But the seed will not take root and flourish until individuals, taking responsibility for their own destiny, speak the truth and live the truth; unless they are vigilant in defence of their own liberty and that of others; unless they insist on justice for themselves and are scrupulously fair in their dealings with others; unless they remain true to their deepest selves in all that they say and do. Society itself must reflect and foster those qualities and values of the individual.

Our task today is not so much to convince people of their sinfulness but of their dignity and destiny as children of God, made in his image and likeness and called in Christ to make all things new. Nothing can ever

totally disfigure that likeness or reduce the need to approach each individual with absolute respect. Does this sound like Utopia, the perfect and painless society? It is rather the Kingdom of God, the civilisation of love, to be built painfully, stone by living stone, out of human lives prepared to sacrifice all in the search for true life and lasting love. Do not tell them what to avoid; speak to them rather of what they can achieve. It is more satisfying to seek the good and to live by it than to concentrate on not breaking the law or simply avoiding evil. Give them ideals for which to strive: truth, freedom, justice, community. The European home we labour to build for all its peoples must enshrine these values.

There is one final consideration to beckon us onwards, a glimpse perhaps of complete fulfilment. Individuals are essentially made for God. The individual is not however swallowed up or denied in that infinite life and love which is God. Instead the individual is affirmed and fulfilled thereby. This is the ultimate mystery of God, the essence of that communion, that *koinonia* which is the Church.

Now the Church is, as the Second Vatican Council declared, 'a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all human beings' (*Lumen Gentium* 1). The inner life and meaning of the Church must therefore provide us with prophetic indications of the way forward for the human family. For there cannot be a spiritual pilgrimage totally at odds with historical progress. Grace after all builds on nature and does not contradict it.

The conclusion has to be that somehow, with much trial and error, but with faith that we are taking the the right path, individuals and states will learn that diversity and unity can and should coexist creatively and constructively. Democracy, which is still in its early stages, has shown what is possible in national communities. The European Community, at an even earlier stage of development, is also a possible pointer for the future. Legitimate diversity, the flourishing of vigorous local and national communities, should pose no threat to the wider, interdependent, international community.

There is still so much to learn from the horrors of this century and its solid achievements. I fear we may be entering a period of confusion and conflict with much suffering. Nevertheless a vision still beckons: the gradual realisation in social, economic and political terms of the Kingdom and its values. Absolute selfishness spells death at every level. Faith that one can renounce some part of one's perceived interests and live even more richly is a hard lesson to learn for individuals, groups and states. But it is that giant leap forward which will ensure the future of individuals and the human family.¹

1 Cardinal Hume preached this sermon at a Solemn Votive Mass in honour of Saints Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, patrons of Europe, at Leeds on 1 September 1991. It appeared in abridged form in *The Times* a few days later.