

Lemsford Lent Lecture – April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006  
**What's good about a Christian lifestyle?**  
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There is a little parable by the Danish 19<sup>th</sup> century radical thinker, Soren Kierkegaard. Its title is: 'The Happy Conflagration – *what happens to those who try to warn the present age?*'

It happened that a fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown who was in the cast came out to inform the audience. They thought it was just a clever joke, and applauded him. He repeated his warning and asked them to leave their seats. They laughed and shouted even louder.

So I believe the world will come to an end amid general applause from all the wits, who believe that it is a joke.

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Just as with the previous three titles in this series, the question for this last lecture – What's good about a Christian lifestyle? – may provoke at least two questions in return. Some may say 'Why do we even need to ask the question?' People in former ages would have used words like *way of life* instead of *lifestyle*, but they would have thought it unnecessary to pose the question like this. The Christian life, the Christian ethic - all that has been revealed to us in the Scriptures and by the Church as the right way to live – is, self-evidently, *good*. Goodness itself, in this way of thinking, is defined by what is prescribed for us as the Christian life. Although Christian people often fail to live up to the standard, yet we know what it is. We can constantly aspire and strive towards it – by prayer and by God's grace in our lives. So 'what's good' about living the Christian life is that it's the way God calls us and desires us to live.

But another immediate question in response to my title would be less dismissive, and yet just as curious. What *is* a Christian lifestyle today? - you may say. What do we mean by living in a Christian way? Which parts of the Bible or which parts of Christian teaching do you want to throw into the mix of this slightly modern sounding phrase 'a Christian lifestyle?! Only when we know that can we judge what's good about it.'

You can begin to see that we could be looking at an agenda, not just for this lecture, but for a whole further series or course that would take us many more weeks. The subject of Christian Ethics does indeed get much fuller treatment than I can give it now, in our colleges and ministry courses. Still, let's have a go.

I have decided that I will try to *illustrate* what it could mean to talk about a Christian lifestyle and why it's good, relevant and desirable. First I offer just a few thoughts about the different reasons there may be for talking about any Christian behaviour or actions as *good*.

For whichever topics or qualities of life we might choose, there will always be more than one way of understanding the goodness of a Christian lifestyle.

- we can see and understand it to be commended to us by God and so *good in itself*.
- others who see and recognise such a lifestyle will be drawn towards its source. In seeing Christian love in action, eg the selfless caring for an elderly parent by a son or daughter, or a community project run by the goodwill and

generosity of a church group, someone may want to know where such loves springs from. Here the short answer to the question 'What's good about a Christian lifestyle' is that it points to the nature of God's love in Christ, and draws others to realise that love for themselves.

- a Christian lifestyle, both individual and communal, will be spreading goodness in and around the world, which is often what we mean by 'The Kingdom of God'. For that Kingdom to come more fully, there will need to be people living in some kind of conformity to Christian values, or as we might say living actively Christian lives. When that happens, the good that flows into the world is the good that really counts.

But what do we mean by The Kingdom of God? This brings us to the huge questions in Christian Ethics about how we see Christ and Christian values *in relation to* the culture in which we are set. And it is these I need to discuss before I get onto my own particular chosen aspects of a Christian lifestyle for this evening...

The great 20<sup>th</sup> century moral theological Reinhold Niebuhr identified some 5 different approaches to the way that Christ and Culture are related. **Christ** is here to be identified with all Christian values and the Kingdom of God itself in human life, while **Culture** also has the widest possible meaning. It's not about books, art and music so much as about all aspects of our daily life and society, everything that makes us who we are, from science and technology and the media through to family, race and nationality - the entire mix of things that shape us, personally and in society as a whole.

Niebuhr sees:

- Christ against Culture – when the truth of Christ is opposed to many views and ways of life embodied in our culture
- Christ in culture – this is a more positive and optimistic view of human nature, which sees Christian values being embodied and lived out by people whether they accept or deny Christian beliefs for themselves or not.
- Christ above Culture
- Christ and Culture in paradox: a very Lutheran position, relevant for example to the issues of Church and State which we looked at last week. Luther saw state institutions as on the one hand part of a flawed and sinful human culture, and on the other as God-given and deserving our respect and obedience in civil life. A bit like the paradoxical way people today regard politics and politicians with despair, but still hold on to respect for our democracy and parliamentary system as a whole.
- Christ the Transformer of Culture. This puts greater emphasis on Christian engagement with all forms of political and social life, in order to bring about change and reform of so much that is flawed. It contrasts with models of Christian lifestyle which are mainly a kind of withdrawal, retreat or detachment from the ways of the world.

It's helpful I think to see this last approach as similar to the first (Christ against Culture) but able to draw from the second (Christ in culture), ie not always 'going against the grain' of human nature and culture.

I have been exercised about whether I should illustrate a Christian lifestyle or virtues which are found *in* our culture, and are quite clearly an established part of it. Examples here would be attitudes such as respect, kindness, tolerance, integrity, and

the telling of truth. These qualities may be under pressure at times, or sorely missing when there is a political scandal, or in the tougher times of life, or in places where criminal behaviour is rampant. We may regret it whenever we notice a lack of good neighbourly attitudes, or rudeness on the trains, or road rage and the like, but on the whole we can recognise values *shared across the culture* from both a Christian and a secular point of view. It's not difficult or surprising to be in favour of the attitudes I mentioned. When we hear a Bible passage commending kindness, patience and love (as in Colossians 3 last Sunday morning), we expect that all people of goodwill can agree and gather round these qualities. They are part of Christ in Culture, for in certain ways a Christian lifestyle is still part of the fabric of our society. There are these values which help to glue society together, and they do nearly all have Christian roots or inspiration, even if that is not too often publicly acknowledged these days.

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Aware of all that, I have chosen rather to concentrate on three areas which are less likely to command widespread agreement and so perhaps will more interesting to think about! They belong perhaps more to the Christ against Culture, at least just now, and so could be called in the jargon 'counter-cultural'. Yet I also believe they are integral to a Christian lifestyle. I would like to discuss in turn, the qualities of *modesty* and *faithfulness*, in the context of personal morality, and then *moderation* in the context of our global, environmental crisis.

For I believe that:

- in a world of self-promotion and individualism, we need a *modesty*, to show that the individual is part of and subservient to the needs of the whole community:
- in a world which exalts personal freedom in relationships, including the freedom to discard those relationships almost at will, we need a *faithfulness* within all serious personal commitments to one another, and uniquely in that of marriage.
- in a world of consumerist excess, which idolises personal choice, a Christian lifestyle takes *moderation* as a given, as a welcome bridle, not a unwelcome curb. We learn to *moderate* all our desires, and to live more simply, so that there will be an inhabitable earth for those who come after us.

### **Modesty**

This personal virtue is often now seen as part of the baggage of sentimental and unwanted Victorian morality. It may be mistakenly assumed as something only to do with women covering themselves up, whether to go inside a Catholic church or as part of repressive Muslim dress codes for women. I am not arguing for some pre-feminist or puritan attitude that women should wear hats, or that children should be seen and not heard, nor for any other remnants of social conventions that are only a narrow part of modesty as a Christian virtue.

I mean rather the right kind of self-assessment, the true kind of humility and self-understanding which is a regular feature of New Testament teaching. I mean the opposite of self-centred pride which is always wanting to list one's own achievements or personal attributes. The understanding of ourselves which puts us in a proportionate perspective alongside other people and God. I mean the attitude of the tax collector in Jesus's parable (Luke 18), whose modesty and reliance on God's grace contrasts with the self-reliant and self-satisfied Pharisee.

It is a hard balance to strike sometimes, but it's surely good that our self-worth is not something we have to parade or blow up out of proportion. Our self-worth is a given. By contrast in today's culture, there is an explosive kind of self-promotion in which the *What I want* and the *Who I am* become more important than *What you would like* or *Who you are* or (to use a gospel phrase): *Who is my neighbour?*

It's not just the pervasive presence of advertising in every part of our life, though that can be bad enough. Businesses, schools, organisations and individuals, yes and churches and charities too, we're all caught up in the business of selling ourselves. We're all inclined to stray over the line from letting others know who we are, into the area of a constantly inflated sense of our own importance.

The 'How I'm feeling' question predominates over all others. We've been conditioned to believe that it's good to put ourselves at number 1. This is linked with a self-centredness which is what the Church traditionally called pride, in fact the sin of pride.

Modesty is part of the antidote. This modesty has little to do with deference or any old-fashioned idea of knowing one's place in society. It is much more at a spiritual level to do with the nature of God in Christ. In Philippians 2 Paul gives a credal statement of how God came down to our level in Christ. It was God's ultimate self-emptying, his supreme act of humility, which is also demonstrated in Jesus's own life. This quality of God's nature, as in other areas of Christian ethics, is what guides our sense of what's good in the Christian character.

What's good about modesty is that it guards us against hyping ourselves, or getting ourselves and our lives out of proportion to our place in human society or God's purpose for the human race.

It is one thing that each of us is a unique person, that every child has a precious worth, that every person has an absolute dignity. All that can be agreed and affirmed, again and again. It is quite another to move towards a view that each of us has *more* value than our neighbour, whether next door or on the other side of the world! We need modesty, above all, to remind us how many other people in the world around us are just as special as ourselves!

## **Faithfulness**

It would be easy for me to say: marriage is in decline. Isn't it awful? 40% of children are now born outside marriage. The majority of all households in the UK do not now consist of a married couple, with or without any other family. Over 30% of all households contain just one person on their own.

Some of these facts and figures do point to a need to recover a belief in the rightness and goodness of lifelong marriage, compared with the alternatives. I declare that belief as my own.

It's also not as simple as that, so I need to say why. Any study of the history of family life, in this culture and many others, will show you that men and women have lived together in various patterns and lifestyles. The 'norm' of legal, sacred and exclusively faithful marriage, as enunciated in the New Testament, has been far from universally practised. In other words, it may be that the current swing towards cohabitation/living together in this country (instead of marriage) is a swing away from a more ordered society of 50 years ago, but not necessarily such a swing from the

underlying principles of faithfulness and committed love which are at the heart of the Christian view of marriage. Much depends on whether cohabitation is seen as a kind of betrothal or intention to live as faithful and in fact lifelong partners, or whether it is deliberately chosen as an alternative that does not carry with it the responsibilities of marriage. The current rate of marriage break-up and divorce is still of great concern, especially as it affects children involved. Faithfulness is the one virtue that specifically aims to keep a marriage secure both for the partners and for any children of the marriage.

We don't know enough yet about the rate or pattern of break-up for cohabiting couples, or its effect on wider society. But I mentioned single-person households. As an aside, it's not difficult to see that a large part of our general housing problem is caused by the fact that more and more adults are now living on their own – whether it is because they are choosing to do so, or because the ending of a relationship means they end up on their own whether they like it or not. Either way, the seemingly endless demand for new homes to be built, and the shortage of homes, is driving up prices in an unnatural way, to say nothing of the loss of green fields and countryside. Why is it that inflation is such an evil in other areas of the economy but when it comes to house prices people see it almost as a game or simply a great investment for those who are home owners?

So there's more than one reason why we should ask whether the huge increase in single-person households is a good thing.

But what are we to say about the blessings and the good things that marriage provides? To those who are happily married or who have stuck with it in faithfulness through the years, it is generally obvious. Weddings are not the only times when marriage should be celebrated. In fact they are in a way too easy an occasion. The really tough demands such as bringing up children are usually still in the future. That is when faithfulness comes into its own, five or ten years down the line, when we know that relationships are most typically put under strain. An anniversary such as the 25<sup>th</sup> is just as much an occasion for partying and for re-commitment. David Sheppard the former Bishop of Liverpool once said: Marriage is about being committed to reconciliation. That is for many couples a truth and a gift, which is worth all the struggle. Reconciliation includes and implies all the effort of which faithfulness is the outward sign. Sometimes reconciliation does not happen, despite every effort. But without a commitment to it and to faithfulness, our social fabric will surely become weaker and more damaged. We can praise and teach the more obvious qualities such as patience, friendship and good humour. We also need the more objective standard of faithfulness.

What's good about it? It's the precondition for mutual growth in love and trust, and when applicable for the upbringing of children. Children need the stability of a home and family, and this aspect of marriage and faithfulness is still too often disregarded by the secular pundits and advocates of unlimited personal freedom. There is a 'do as you please' lifestyle, and a 'do it when you like' lifestyle which is attractive to many because it fits the minimalist morality of 'not doing harm to anyone else'. What's good about faithfulness in marriage is nothing less than the underpinning of a healthy society in which children have the best chance of growth and security, by being loved and cared for by both of their parents. But it's also the way in which marriage itself can grow to be a rich, unique relationship of exclusive love and trust. It will be a source of stability and joy, not just for the couple but for their family and, crucially, for their wider community.

## Moderation

My third and last quality or attitude of life is one which I believe is a more universal good than the other two more personal virtues we have been thinking about. It is an aspect of Christian lifestyle which is becoming more urgent and pressing for us all.

Moderation. It's not as exciting as a virtue like courage. It's not as the journalists would say very sexy. But that's the point. It is counter-cultural, because our culture wants things to be exciting, most of the time. Above all our culture wants us to consume things. For that, we need energy. And to that, our planet earth is saying to us, 'Hang on, we have a problem'.

At the end of his letter to the Philippians, somewhere in prison in the mid first century, St Paul wrote 'let your moderation be known to all'. He didn't quite mean what I am commending to you now, but then he wasn't faced with the scale of our global excess, though he was quite familiar with and ready to tackle the problem of simple human greed.

The Good News Bible version of that phrase says 'Show a *gentle* attitude towards everyone', and here we have a pointer to the best and most commendable part of a Christian lifestyle which takes our global predicament seriously.

For not only are we called to be gentle with one another. *We are to be gentle with the earth.* We must now learn, somehow, to express at every level of our lives a gentleness towards the earth which is the home God has given us – and when I say us I mean of course the whole human race.

The evidence for climate change and global warming is now indisputable. Not only scientists but also theologians have been taking it seriously for some time. The one time I almost lost my temper with a student in an ethics class 3 years ago, was when he said that the evidence for global warming was dubious. It is a measure of how things have moved in just three years that debate is now centred not on whether global warming and climate change are happening, but only on how fast it is happening, and the *extent* of the effects that it will have on us all in the future.

We are beginning to realise, with horror, that despite all the improvements to our standards of living in the West and many other countries, we have treated the earth itself with a roughness, ignorance and greed which is starting to give us a nasty pay-back. Our greed may at times have been all unconscious but it is real none the less. Call it economic expansion or exploitation, whichever you like, this is not the issue. The people who must now be heard are the scientists and the prophets who are speaking to us with one urgent voice: change your ways before it is too late.

For the first time in human history, we are by human activity changing our weather systems and our climate. The changes to our climate may as well be called global heating as global warming, to help us wake up to the threat. The only question is not whether changes will happen but how serious will they be and how difficult will they be to cope with. My contention is that even if we take a conservative or optimistic view of the damage that will be caused by hotter temperatures and rising sea levels on current trends, there is still a hugely strong case for the quality of moderation eg in the

case of carbon emissions, reducing and tempering our current emissions. If we accept more pessimistic predictions the case for drastic action becomes quite overwhelming.

But will people believe it? Or will they be willing to accept the sacrifices and changes that will be necessary to avert far more damage than even now we have to contemplate? At bottom, to *moderate* our material desires?

And so here I come back finally to the parable of the Happy Conflagration, with which I began. It is an apocalyptic vision, but it is not as metaphorical as it would have seemed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the age when indeed it seemed that the earth was ours to explore, subdue and exploit without limit.

A recent book on this subject has just been published this year, called *The Revenge of Gaia*, by James Lovelock. It is a bleak analysis of global warming, and pessimistic in its outlook for the earth's future, though he is not short of views and ideas about how we could respond positively to this crisis, and find ways to tide ourselves through it. Lovelock is pessimistic because we are not waking up to our predicament in time. Global warming, he argues with compelling evidence, will soon reach the point where no amount of preventive measures will be enough to stop its rampant damage.

Perhaps we are not quite like Kierkegaard's audience who treated the news of earth's demise as one more joke from the clown. Tell us another one, they laughed. We may be sceptics of a different sort. We'll wait for governments to come and put out the fire, or see if it's going to spread any further in our direction before we do anything too drastic ourselves. Surely it's not going to be that bad?

My answer again is simple but twofold.

- 1) Even if the most cautious scientists are right and the effects of climate change are not going to be as bad as extremist scenarios suggest, we still have an urgent duty to act now.
- 2) Governments will act more firmly if their people are behind them, if people have shown by their attitudes and at local level that new courses of action are needed. Moderation as a Christian lifestyle in our use of fuel and energy, in the whole range of lifestyle choices before us, is not only good in itself, for our own moral health now. It is also good because it is a necessary part of persuading governments to enact policies of moderation, ie gentleness - and yes that means *restriction* on many damaging effects of various economic activity across the earth.

I have only touched in the most general terms on what it means to live by moderation, to have a Christian lifestyle that is good for the environment, eg in terms of not wasting energy, respecting the earth, and finding new or acceptable sources of energy for the future. Here is where personal ethics and social ethics go absolutely hand in hand. The question of My lifestyle cannot be separated from that of Our lifestyle.

All of us can be accused of hypocrisy. All of know that we do not, by ourselves, choose what's best for the environment all the time, for all sorts of reasons. We will sometimes see people whose lifestyle does point the way for us, but it's a lifestyle that we can't espouse or express for ourselves. That means the risk that we shall say one thing, but do another. That is something to confess, but I strongly believe it is not a cause for despair.

What's good and what's best about a Christian lifestyle is that it aspires and aims to reflect something of the love of Christ, both in our personal lives and our communal lives. No Christian has ever walked the full Christian way of life. Only Jesus has fully reflected and lived the Father's nature.

But what's good is that God forgives and enables us to keep picking ourselves up again. That includes being set free from either guilt on the one hand, or despair and cynicism on the other. It will be the cynicism from which we most need to be spared in the years ahead. We shall need to know that by our moderation, and by our action, we will make a difference.

### **Conclusion**

In this age of competing lifestyles, 'a Christian lifestyle' is no longer a guarantee of general approval. It may, depending on the culture, be seen as just one among others. A commitment to modesty, faithfulness and the moderation of our desires may be seen as well-meaning but ineffective. It may be even be seen as misguided. For the spirit of our age is above all to approve of personal choice, to let people make their own decisions about how to lead their lives. It has for some been a very liberating spirit for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it could be fatal for our global community in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

In the context of a need for a global community, the best thing about a Christian lifestyle is that it witnesses to a love of humanity and to our fundamental need for each other in community. That in turn show us what's good about accepting common laws in both national life, *and moral life*, for the good of all.

What's good about a Christian lifestyle is *not* (like so many other lifestyles) that I have chosen it for myself, but that I have *accepted it*, as the path along which by God's grace I, and all of us, are meant to walk.

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