

The Allocution at the Victorian Investiture of Knights and Dames into the Sovereign Order of St John of Jerusalem Knights Hospitaller

Friday 3 November 2023

When I was at school in what seems like a lifetime ago, I was introduced by my English master Mr Adcock to the works of the British novelist and short story writer L P Hartley. My favourite of his works was the 1953 novel 'The Go-Between', later adapted by Harold Pinter and made into a film with a stellar cast (at least for my generation) including Julie Christie, Alan Bates and Michael Redgrave. The novel's opening sentence is arguably the most remembered of Hartley's words. 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' This phrase has become almost proverbial. And it is on this phrase that I want to spend a little time reflecting tonight.

'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'

Here is the challenge for all of us who stand in an historical tradition. It is easy to assume that our forebears regard issues through the same eyes as our own. Which can get us into all sorts of trouble. Take the Bible for example. The Bible is as it always was normative for the Christian faith. But it was not written by 21st century people. A literal reading of the text with 21st century eyes, ignoring the fact that the texts were written by different people in different times and different places with different questions on their minds can lead us into some pretty strange places.

So we no longer believe the earth to be flat. Nor do we believe that there is a solid dome covering the earth with water above it; and that windows open from time to time in this firmament to let the rain pass through. And that the earth was made in seven days. And that woman was created from the rib of man. And so on and so forth. Theological truth and scientific truth are not the same things. If we pretend they are then we are likely to make some pretty glaring mistakes.

The great Anglican theologian John Macquarrie said that all revelation is an answer to a question, and if any revelation does not answer a question we are asking then it ceases to be revelation for us. 'To deal properly with any tradition we need to hear clearly the questions being asked in today's and tomorrow's world and to engage with them. Shouting ever more loudly yesterday's truths is unlikely to prove satisfying to any but the already convinced.'

No lesser person than Jesus of Nazareth recognises that we are always engaged in a conversation between the past and the present.

Jesus said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' (Matthew 13.52)

The danger in any tradition is that it becomes a prisoner of its own history; locked in a time-war with much to say about the past, little to say to the present and nothing at all to do with the future. The master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old, but has little or nothing of the new. That great Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple had this to say on the place of tradition.

'There is always an initial presumption in favour of the tradition for it represents the deposit of innumerable individual apprehensions. None the less it must be remembered that it is by fresh individual apprehensions that the tradition has been developed, and to reject the new intimation may be, not the suppression of human aberration, but a quenching of the divine spirit.'ⁱⁱ

Similarly in 1990, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams gave the opening address at a gathering at St Albans Holborn. He said this.

'Our Christian past is not a boxroom or a cupboard under the stairs or the bedroom of Prince Albert preserved by Queen Victoria exactly as the dear man left it. It is a room for living, a place to spend time learning and reflecting, a place whose inner geography changes subtly and naturally as we ourselves grow.'ⁱⁱⁱ

What then does this say to us, the Knights and Dames of the Sovereign Order of St John of Jerusalem Knights Hospitaller? And in particular to you Investees as you are about to be inducted into this Order?

Let's begin by reflecting on our origins which span over 1000 years of history. Since shortly after 1050, the Sovereign Order of St. John of Jerusalem has focused on aiding the sick and the poor and developing methods to improve survival rates and patient care. A convent was built in Jerusalem which became the Benedictine monastery of St. John the Baptist. It was on the adjacent site that the first hospice was built.

After the successful occupation of Jerusalem by the First Crusade, a group of knights discovered the hospice run by Brother Gerard in 1099. This hospice used very advanced techniques for the day. It kept clean facilities, each resident slept in an individual bed and food dishes were not shared, all of which led to a superior survival rate.

The group of knights joined in the hospice's charitable works and by this they strengthened what would evolve into the Sovereign Order of St. John, a Christian, chivalric, ecumenical and sovereign military order which continued the work of helping the sick and the poor

while also defending Christians in the Holy Lands. In Western Europe, the Sovereign Order embodied the essence of the Crusades, uniting arms and religion to serve where needed in the name of Faith for Humanity.

The world of our origins is very different to the world of our present experience. Our order was formed in the midst of the struggle for primacy between Christendom and the Saracens. We are in a very different place in today's global world. The military side of our tradition has become less meaningful in a post-Christendom age where building bridges between those who see things differently to us has largely replaced trying to subjugate the other by force.

Indeed where we see the will to power emerge in all its ugly brutality we are moved to resist it. So we oppose all types of fundamentalism, and the violence and suppression which are the pervading legacy of their presence. We oppose the domination of personal ambition over the needs of the community. And we do this because we are Christians, different in denomination but united in our love of Christ, and our commitment to be his disciples.

What remains unchanged from the foundation of our order to the present day are the needs of the poor, the marginalised and the dispossessed. Here is our *raison d'être* our object and our goal. And this is a theological object. As a Christian order we care for the poor because that is what Christ commands, and because this is the standard by which we shall be judged.

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25.31-40)

It was that saint of the 20th century Mother Teresa of Calcutta herself a member of our order who told us that when we encounter the poor, there we meet Christ in his distressing disguise. Take a moment to reflect on that. Not that we are as Christ ministering to those in need. But that the needy come to us as Christ offering us the opportunity to serve.

Our second lesson from Paul's Letter to the Romans provides us with our Mission Statement.

Is our love genuine? Do we hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good; do we love one another with mutual affection and seek to outdo one another in showing honour?

Can we say of ourselves that we do not lag in zeal, that we are ardent in spirit, serving the Lord? Will we rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers?

It is a significant commitment that we make, all who are members of this ecumenical Christian order. It a significant moment for our investees as you contemplate the gravity of the oaths you are about to make. Are we worthy? Of course we are not in our own strength. We are only too well aware that the treasure we hold is as is held in earthen vessels.

As the call of the prophet Isaiah tells us we are only made worthy by the grace of God. The flame has touched our lips. And now God asks, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?"

Will you answer, 'Here Am I; send me?' For Christ's sake.

The Rt.Revd. John Parkes AM GCHSJ

ⁱ Macquarrie John, Principles of Christian Theology – Revised Edition (1979, London; SCM Press)

ⁱⁱ Temple, William Nature, Man and God (1940, London: Macmillan) 344

ⁱⁱⁱ Affirming Catholicism: Papers given at a day conference at ST Albans Holborn on Saturday 9 June 1990