

CW Proper 20 (25 after Trinity) Holy Trinity Cuckfield 25.10.20 Ecclesiastes 11-12 2 Timothy 2.1-7

Sermon 442 - Rules

Abstract: We need to consider to what extent meritocracy aligns with Christianity.

*Ecclesiastes 11-12

* 2 Timothy 2.1-7

"No-one is crowned", says the author of 2 Timothy, "without competing according to the rules." A statement which most of us would have taken for granted in our childhood. But it cannot be taken for granted now. You only have to look at the first Presidential so-called Debate; the President of one of the two most powerful countries in the world subjected his rival to a stream of abuse, interrupting him every time he tried to speak. But that is only the worst example, made possible by a whole sub strata of rule breaking and rudeness which made the Trump Presidency possible. And on this side of the Atlantic, did we really think, when we were children, that the supposed pillars of society, educated in our private schools, taught to "play the game" and to honour conventions without needing rules that, as adults, they would trample down conventions, cause a financial crash, promote the PPI swindle and raise themselves to such levels of pay that the top 1% of our society is now as rich as the bottom 50%. Society is now no longer divided between right and left but between the rule makers and the rule takers, the former, of course, being exempt from the rules they make.

As you may recall, I am somewhat wary of the Book of Ecclesiastes because it strikes me as being somewhat hypocritical; its central theme is the evil of vanity and yet I cannot help thinking that the author is vain, proud of his own achievements and supposed moral superiority. Having said that, however, let us take the condemnation of vanity at its face value; the message can be valid even if the messenger is flawed.

And it is this vanity which causes rule breaking. Compared with pride, which claims that we are better than God, vanity, which simply claims the superiority of one human being over another, may appear to be trivial but it is equally corrosive: whereas pride rejects our obligation to love God, vanity rejects our obligation to love each other.

At this point I want to introduce a seriously controversial point which may give you a bit of a jolt. The Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel claims that one of the most powerful forces for social destruction is meritocracy, the theory that society should be organised to provide equal opportunity so that talent can rise to the top*1. Sandel's attack sounds ridiculous, everybody knows that the best way to run society is to provide equal opportunity so that the brightest people get the best jobs and the most money. But the problem, he says, is when people begin to think that they have reached the top through their own individual efforts, that they deserve to be where they are and that, conversely, people at the bottom are also there because that is what they deserve. Sandel points out that in a complex society nobody does anything in isolation which is why theories of individual liberty are both unreasonable and exploitive; but he also points out that most people at the top do not rise to it but have always been there, sustained by inherited wealth and privilege. Yes, there are working class children like me who went to Cambridge and Harvard but we are the exceptions and our number is actually dwindling.

This is not, however, simply a discussion of political theory. There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever in the life and teaching of Jesus that he favoured a meritocratic system, that he thought the rich and talented more deserving of his consideration and his love.

The Commandment of love is supposed to view all our neighbours as equal in the sight of God in whose image they are made and who therefore should inspire us to reflect their equality before God in their equality as humans; not a theoretical equality of opportunity but in an actual equality of respect and consideration. Do we really think that people born with mental incapacities should be rewarded with near destitution when those lucky enough to be born with all their faculties, into comfortable surroundings, should be rewarded with boundless wealth? Are these the kind of relative differences that echo the life and teaching of Jesus?

I mentioned the link between pride and vanity earlier and I now want to develop this idea a little. Moral bankruptcy, of the sort represented by our worldly elites, the rich and the powerful, the rule makers above the rules, is the result of wilful denial of God's purposes for us; and that disobedience stems from a lack of worship, such that vanity is the result of pride, we do not love each other because we do not love and worship God.

So what do we love and worship? Well, apparently paradoxically, we like rules but more often than we like to think, we like them because they are our rules; we are the rule makers. Even now, in the midst of a pandemic, it turns out that the rich rule makers are blaming the poor rule takers for their fate; although Covid-19 can afflict anybody, it largely affects the poor who are subjected to rules which do not address their poverty. The meritocrats, full of self-regard, blame the poor and sick for being poor and sick, except, of course, when it suits them to applaud key workers while refusing them a pay rise!

For us there are two serious dangers. The first is that we fail to recognise the discrepancy between meritocracy and the teaching of Jesus; the second is that, perhaps unconsciously, we collude with the rule breakers by staying silent. There are exceptions but, by and large, rules are made to control the strong and protect the weak, so as we enter an era of rule breaking by the political and financial elite, we should not be surprised if our society becomes even more divisive and unstable. And, if nothing I have said convinces you of the Christian argument for loving one another, you might be better served by the opening of our reading from Ecclesiastes which says if you cast your bread on the waters there is a good chance it will return to you later; good pragmatic advice; but I wouldn't count on it.

*1. Sandel, Michael: The Tyranny of Merit.