

Study

My final talk today is about personal study and how it might lead to personal devotion and public proclamation of the Gospel. And how that study might be a blessing for us and for the people with whom we have to do.

I want to start my thoughts by setting up before you an example of learned priestly scholarship and preaching that I can then shoot down. It comes from that wonderful novel by Barbara Pym, *Some Tame Gazelle*, which is all about two spinster sisters of a certain age, Belinda and Harriet, both of whom are in different ways enamoured of the clergy in their village parish. Harriet has a long history of fussing over the curates, while her elder sister 'has harboured sober feelings of devotion towards Archdeacon Hoccleve for thirty years'. The novel contains an account of the scholarly Archdeacon's much anticipated sermon on the last judgment, and I'd like to read you part the story.

The Archdeacon had ascended the pulpit steps (and) Belinda... settled herself comfortably in the pew, as did the rest of the congregation, having just sung with great vigour that the world was very evil.

The text was given out, quite a usual one from the Revelation. *And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.*

Harriet looked at her watch. She supposed they would have to endure the Archdeacon for at least twenty minutes, possibly twenty-five minutes or even half an hour. She sighed and tried to listen to what he was saying. It was some consolation that he was preaching a sermon of his own composition instead of one of those tedious literary things that Belinda said he read so magnificently.

‘We are apt to accept this vision of the new heaven and the new earth with too much complacency,’ he declared.

Oh well, thought Harriet, clergymen are always saying things like that.

‘But do we realise all that must happen before we can hope to share in this bliss? If indeed, we are found worthy. I say again, do we realise? Have we any idea at all?’ The Archdeacon paused impressively and peered at his congregation: a harmless enough collection of people – old Mrs Prior and her daughter, Miss Jenner, Miss Beard and Miss Smiley in front with the children, ever watchful to frown on giggles or fidgets – the bank manager, who sometimes read the lessons – the Misses Bede and the guests from the Vicarage – Count Bianco – Miss Liversidge and Miss Aspinall – of course they did not realise, but he was going to tell them. ‘The Judgment Day,’ he almost shouted, so loudly that Harriet had to take out her handkerchief to stifle her inappropriate amusement, and old Mrs Prior let out a moan. ‘That day may be soon,’ he went on, ‘it may even be tomorrow.’

The congregation shifted awkwardly in their seats. It was uncomfortable to be reminded that the Judgment Day might be tomorrow.

‘*Dies Irae*,’ he continued, lingering on the words with enjoyment. Belinda saw Edith Liversidge purse her lips disapprovingly at this Romish expression. ‘Day of wrath,’ he translated. ‘And what a terrible day that will be!’

The congregation, still rather uneasy and disturbed, reminded themselves that of course such a thing could not *really* happen. Why, scientists told us that it would take millions of years for the sun to move sufficiently far from

the earth for life to become extinct. At least it was perhaps not exactly that, but something very like it. They knew enough to realise that the Archdeacon was being ridiculous and that the Judgment Day could not possibly be tomorrow. When the first uncomfortable shock had passed they were able to laugh at themselves. How could they have been so silly as to be alarmed!

But even as they were thinking thus, the relentless voice from the pulpit was pouring scorn on those scientists who thought they knew how the world had begun and how it would end. How could they know? These matters were known to God alone. The Judgment Day was as likely to be tomorrow as at any time in the far distant future. The world was indeed very evil, as they had just been singing in that fine hymn, translated from the Latin, the times were waxing late. All through our literature poets had been haunted by the idea of the Last Day and what it would be like...

The congregation suddenly relaxed. It was going to be one of the Archdeacon's usual sermons after all. There had been no need for those uncomfortable fears. They settled down again, now completely reassured, and prepared themselves for a long string of quotations, joined together by a few explanations from the Archdeacon.¹

The Archdeacon's dull, self-referring, literary sermons are a constant background feature of the story and they present as an example, albeit, I think, rather an endearing one, of how not to be a scholarly cleric. It's not that I am against study for its own sake. Much parochial work can get dull and it's excellent for clergy to have intellectual interests unrelated to our pastoral tasks to feed our mind and our souls. I honestly think we need that even if we don't need heartlessly to inflict it onto our listeners.

¹ *Some Tame Gazelle*, Barbara Pym, Virago 2009, pp. 105-107

Clergy should, though, in my opinion, want to be people of learning and culture. I have a friend who is the Anglican chaplain in Belgrade and I have visited him there on various occasions. One of the things that strikes me about the Serbian Orthodox Church is the way in which it understands itself, and especially its religious and its clergy, to have been the custodian of Serbian culture, not least during the centuries of Ottoman rule when Serbian popular culture was largely suppressed apart from in the monasteries and churches. Certainly, if you go into a Serbian church or monastery you can see and hear the ways in which the Church has been the repository of the national culture in terms of the visual arts, music and letters over many centuries.

And whereas we do not share the same set of social circumstances that the Serbs lived through under the Turks, nevertheless I do think that as Christian clergy we should be concerned to be reasonably learned people who inhabit and commend Christian culture, both for our own benefit and the good of others.

I want to reflect on two aspects of this. The first is to do with personal study, loving Christ with all our mind, and how that might appropriately play out in terms of personal devotion and preaching; the second is to do with the values and virtues that Christian culture commends, and this will ring bells with clergy who have anything to do with schools, but also the wider society too.

Personal Study

I remember often hearing our teachers at theological college say that study and reading are usually the first things to go. Once students leaves college and are ordained and occupied with parochial duties, it is much harder for them to make

time to study. My appeal to you today is don't let your studies slide away. It is not an optional extra to be indulged in when you aren't all that busy with other things. You might like to cast your mind back to your ordination and the answers you made to the Bishop's question, at least if you were ordained relatively recently: Will you be diligent in prayer, in reading Holy Scripture, and in all studies that will deepen your faith and fit you to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel? You will have answered in the affirmative.

These studies are an intrinsic part of the priesthood and not just something for people who like that sort of thing, and not just something to do when you're not too busy on other important matters. Without study we will not be fit to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel and this point is taken up by Pope John Paul II in his reflection on priestly formation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, when he writes, 'If we expect every Christian... to be prepared to make a defence of the faith and to account for the hope that is in us (cf 1 Peter 3. 15), then all the more should candidates for the priesthood and priests have diligent care of the quality of their intellectual formation in their education and pastoral activity. For the salvation of their brothers and sisters they should seek an ever deeper knowledge of the divine mysteries.'² St John Paul makes the same point as the ordinal, that our study should fit us to bear witness, for the salvation of our brothers and sisters.

I'd like to comment on how this might happen practically and to share with you ways in which I have tried to integrate study into my own ministry over the years. So these remarks are from the perspective of a parish priest and my experience has been shaped by what others have advised and suggested, so they won't exactly be original or surprising to you.

² *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II, Pauline Books and Media, 1992, p.100

I reckon I have three types of book on the go most of the time. First will be some kind of Bible commentary. At the moment I am enjoying Tom Wright's book called *Finding God in the Psalms*. We are running a parish study group on it and study groups will often be, for me, a prompt to Bible Study, as will the preparation of Sunday sermons. And I notice that when I am enjoying reading a book about the Scriptures that it informs my preaching. I don't think I subject the parishioners to great hefty chunks of quotation, like Archdeacon Hoccleve, but I find the task of preaching more interesting and enjoyable when I have been enjoying some study of the Bible. Whether or not the parishioners find my preaching more enjoyable and interesting is something you'd have to ask them, but I *hope* they do.

The second type of book I like to have on the go will usually be a combination of theological and devotional and I try to read for 15 or 20 minutes in the morning between Morning Prayer and Mass. It's good to choose a time for this when you're not likely to get disturbed and that time works for me. Some really good books that I have enjoyed reading in this way are sermons by Rowan Williams, books of reflections by Cardinal Hume, and in recent years I have loved reading the excellent books by Pope Benedict of his audience addresses. These have the benefit of being both short and very rich and they lend themselves really well to *Lectio Divina*. I expect you all know all about this, but perhaps I can just share with you how I try to go about this way of spiritual reading. You read a passage slowly and thoughtfully and stop when you come across something that attracts your attention; then you meditate on it, perhaps making connections in your mind between what you have read and portions of scripture or other writings or hymns; then you address God and say to him what has arisen from your meditation; and then in a time of contemplation you simply rest in that moment of prayer for a while. This sort of prayerful reading can provoke startling resolutions (Basil Hume's book *Searching for God* made me decide to test my vocation at Mirfield; Pope Benedict's catechesis on Ss Cyril and Methodius prompted me to organise a

sabbatical). More often, day by day, it will be a quieter outcome, like last week appreciating the life of St Jerome a bit more or remembering to cherish the virtue of hope. But that way of prayerful reading is an important part of my spiritual regime. It can sometimes go in stops and starts a bit but it is settled enough to feel like my regular daily study and prayer time. I hope you can manage to find an appropriate way of doing the same thing. And it's easier if the material you choose to read is something you find interesting rather than some worthy great tome you feel you ought to read but ultimately won't ever manage.

The third type of book I have on the go is a novel. I haven't chosen to refer to Barbara Pym and Graham Green in these talks entirely by accident. I think clergy ought to read quite widely, to be able to commend novels to others and to use what we have read to help us understand life better and to enrich the telling of the Christian story. Sometimes something like Gilead by Marilynne Robinson will surprise and delight us by putting into words things we know to be true but haven't articulated ourselves. But I had better not get started on novels I have loved or we will never finish.

Virtues and Values: Christian Study and the Public Arena

I want to say something about the way a priest's study of the Christian tradition and culture plays out more widely in the public arena. I think this is a particular current concern for us in a society that is bamboozled by what Marilynne Robinson describes as the 'para-science' of the new atheism, on the one hand, and perplexed by the phenomenon of religious extremism on the other. Supposing that traditional Christian language about the moral life will only have things to say about who we may or may not go to bed with, our culture has mostly liberated itself from the matrix of values and visions that have shaped the way our society

has developed over many centuries. But this newly liberated society has found it difficult to find an idiom stronger than opinion or aspiration with which to address situations that it finds deeply threatening to its way of life. In fact, we have found it very difficult to say what our way of life amounts to at all. Cut off from its root, the post-religious cultural branch looks withered and feeble.

I wonder if any of you have had the peculiar task of producing documents for your schools that demonstrate a commitment, required by the Government, to 'British Values'? This is an extraordinary thing, as if a value's *Britishness* will necessarily make it good. Last month, I had to chair a meeting of our Governing Body committee that reviewed the school's safeguarding policy and we have inserted a new section into to deal with the issue of radicalisation. It mentions warning signs, that teachers are now trained to notice, which could alert them to the possibility of a child becoming radicalised. One of these is if a child begins to take 'a sudden interest in religion'. Well, there goes the school Mass. And thank goodness the young Theresa of Avila wasn't at school in the London Borough of Haringey or she would have been whisked away at once into the care of social services.

Well tempted as I am to continue ranting on about this, my point is that a priest's intellectual study, a priest's commitment to inhabit and commend the Christian culture, will have much to contribute in various different contexts to the inarticulate discourse about values, British or otherwise, that we might hope will give shape and form to the society we live in. I have enjoyed reading a recent lecture by Andrew Davison, who very splendidly is the new Canon Philosopher of St Alban's Cathedral, about the Christian intellectual tradition and its place in Christian mission, both in terms of what he describes as 'large and small-scale witness'. I'd like to share with you some of the remarks he makes.

‘On the national stage, keeping traditions of Christian philosophy alive and healthy means that they are available and heard again in our public life... Sometimes we need to remind ourselves, before we can remind anyone else, that the Christian intellectual tradition has things to say... We would do well, as a church, to remember that so much of our shared intellectual framework as a nation, for instance in politics, comes from the Christian philosophical tradition, whether that concerns the limitations to war, or the notion of rights, or the framework for international law. And being more familiar with those treasures from the past, we will be better able to re-articulate them, and develop them, in the present and for the future.’³

This is how we, as priests, might contribute to that discussion about ‘British Values’. And when we think of the contributions to public discourse of people like Rowan Williams, not to mention the wonderful perspectives of Judaism, articulated by someone like Jonathan Sacks, we can see really clearly how religious perspective gives a language to what a largely post-religious commentariat often wants to say. There is almost something analogous here to the situation in Serbia that I was talking about earlier, where the Church was the custodian of culture in long centuries of oppression. We haven’t suffered that experience, but the Church, where it has valued its intellectual heritage, will still be the custodian of a language about ways of being human that, as Davison says in his lecture, are attractive, sane and wise. I hope that Catholic clergy, concerned to inhabit and commend Christian tradition, we would want to be active participants, probably in the small-scale moments of public discourse about our life together, be that from the pulpit, in schools, in conversations with others or wherever. But to take our part, we need to be clergy who read and study and support one another in that enterprise. As you

³ <http://www.stalbans.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Andrew-Davison-Lecture-on-Knowing-and-Loving1.pdf>

consider how your sodality is going to operate, you might want to explore how this aspect of resourcing priestly ministry can be factored into your life together.

Some concluding remarks about knowing and loving

I'd like to make some concluding remarks about a difficulty priests might encounter when they try to incorporate study into their busy lives. If we only think of study as an end in itself I think that's is when it becomes burdensome and maybe even a waste of time. Actually, if we only think of study as a means to bludgeon the new atheists or as a way of ransacking the tradition in order to harangue a school's Governing Body, then the thrill will wear off soon enough. Some clergy seem to like the idea of racking up qualifications and occasionally we read about clergy who have made up fake qualifications to make themselves look clever. What is the point of that? What is the point of any study? Perhaps we might return to those words of Pope John Paul about intellectual formation *'for the salvation of... brothers and sisters'*. Or to the ordinal's words about study that will *'fit (us) to be bear witness'*. These suggest to me that the motive for study is love. And Pope John Paul goes on to quote St Bonaventure in this regard.

Let no one think it is enough for him to read if he lacks devotion, or to engage in speculation without spiritual joy, or to be active if he has no piety, or to have knowledge without charity, or intelligence without humility, or study without God's grace, or to expect to know himself if he is lacking the infused wisdom of God.⁴

⁴ in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, p. 104

We study the things of God because we want to love God. We study Christian tradition and inhabit Christian culture out of love for those to whom we wish to bear witness.

I'd like to say that after twenty years of ordained ministry I feel I am at the very beginning of this work of love and I'm quite sure that I'm not very good at it at all. But this connection between knowledge and love speaks to me, like still small voice. I'm ashamed of how poorly I respond and of how difficult I find this.

Perhaps encouragement might be found from others. I find Karl Rahner's theological writing hard but I really like this little book of his prayers and I want to read you a portion of his prayer called *God of Knowledge*. In it he talks to God about the frustrations of study: how much he has learnt, only subsequently to forget; how much he has learnt that actually seems useless; how the depth of his study only ever seems to scratch surfaces; how his learning fails usually to penetrate his heart. Then he goes on,

Truly, my God, mere knowing is nothing... How can we approach the heart of all things, the true heart of reality? Not by knowledge alone, but by the full flower of knowledge, love. Only the experience of knowledge's blooming into love has any power to work a transformation in me, in my very self. For it is only when I am fully present to an object that I am changed by meeting it. And it is only in love that I am fully present – not in bare knowing, but in the affection engendered by knowing...

Your living Word is still shrouded in darkness. It still echoes ever so faintly from the depths of my heart, where You have spoken it, up into the foreground of my consciousness, where my scrawny knowledge is wont to parade and take itself so seriously. This is the knowledge that ends in

despondency and agony of the soul, that brings nothing but the bitter experience of being forgotten and of deserving to be forgotten, because it can never produce living, organic unity (with You). And yet, behind all this labour and torment, there is already another “knowledge” which has become in me grace-filled reality: Your Word and Your Eternal Light...⁵

⁵ Encounters with Silence, Karl Rahner, St Augustine’s Press, 1999, p. 29