



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – June 2010

The Secular Assault on the Church

MY GRANDPARENTS' local paper was called 'The Free Press'. As a child I thought that that meant that it was a free newspaper – not that such things yet existed. One of the privileges – and prices – of a 'free press' is that nothing is sacred, everything can be challenged, attacked, analysed, ridiculed. It is a 'privilege' because it is a mark of a free society: the State does not control what we hear and what we think. It is a 'price' because press campaigns can be conducted mainly to sell newspapers, and how do you best sell newspapers but by confirming people's prejudices? For some time now, respect for institutions has been in decline: the monarchy survives but politicians are generally thought to be 'on the make' ('expenses' scandal, 'sleaze'), hospitals are thought to be dirty, schools are judged to be failing, and the police are 'tied up with paperwork'. After a decade of 'management by objective', people long to see less form filling, less box ticking, and better success rates all round. And some of this might begin to happen if good news sold newspapers....

The Church too is under attack as never before. The smart baby boomers, their children brought up on a diet of fashionable agnosticism and scientific fundamentalism, have forsaken the Church but are now attacking Christianity as something they can't quite be rid of. Atheists set up Aunt Sallies of God and then gleefully knock them down. Poor theology is ridiculed as if it's all the theology we've got, and church schools (rather too successful for their own good) are re-branded as 'Faith' schools, as if we were all loonies or Moonies. The latest attack is a very skilful one. Take an odious crime – child abuse – and judge the Church not on its current performance in tackling it (which is second to none) but by how it performed ten, twenty, thirty, forty years ago. In those days abusers were treated as people who had made a tragic mistake, were perhaps unwell, could certainly be given help, and a second chance. We now realise how unjust this was to the victims, and how serious the offences really were. Everyone – the medical profession, schools, social services, voluntary organisations – has learnt hard and painful lessons about the consequences of protecting colleagues and institutions rather than the caring for the really vulnerable, the victims. Meanwhile, what an opportunity to attack the Church!

There is some justice in this. Whatever is evil should come to light.

The Church is not, and should not be, protected from the consequences of wrongdoing. So there is something of a cleansing and a purging, making us leaner and fitter for our task of proclaiming the Gospel in a decadent culture. But we need to recognise much of the onslaught for what it is. Where it is seen as a chance to seriously weaken the Church and banish God from our midst, we need to be armed with 'the whole armour of God', that we 'may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places'. (Ephesians 6:11–12).

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