

SERMON FOR ADVENT 2 | 8 December 2013

How much time and thought do we give to things and to people 'abroad' – to people and situations not like ourselves?

The amount of attention given to the death of Nelson Mandela would suggest that we are pretty clued up about what is happening in many parts the world - and we do try to do something when nations are suffering through war, famine or disease – and indeed because of political tyranny. Isn't that, after all, why we went to war in Iraq and in Afghanistan? We believed we were making the world – not just the UK - a safer place.

But that said, I wonder how much we really care? Let's take human rights for example. We have had any number of protests about the treatment meted out to the 30 Greenpeace activists who were locked up after they tried to call attention to the way Russia was drilling for oil in the Arctic sea; we heard a great deal from Foreign Secretary William Hague about the heinous treatment of the Tamils by the government of Sri Lanka during that country's recent dirty war. But what happened this week when David Cameron led a massive trade delegation to China? What was said about the arbitrary arrest of dissidents, the treatment of the Tibetans or the silencing and disappearance of religious minorities and those who speak out about corruption? Apparently nothing.

Ah, we are told, the trade mission was vital to our national interests and therefore to get the trade mission accepted by the Chinese, a deal had to be done: it was a simple trade-off. You want our business? Then keep quiet about human rights issues.

Now I don't want to single out David Cameron per se. We knew the same policy applied in Tony Blair's dealings with Colonel Gaddafi and it has been the policy for twenty years in our dealings with Saudi Arabia on whose oil and armaments orders we depend.

We all know that the UK is not the world economic power it once was. But what of our moral influence; isn't there a substantial place for some kind of ethical influence to be applied in these cases, a way of saying that British values – about human rights, freedom and democracy - are not for sale to the highest bidder?

This was, of course, the position taken by Nelson Mandela. You all know his story as well as I do and we have all heard his famous speeches replayed over the last few days. And the amazing thread throughout it all - in addition to his wonderful humility - was his refusal to give in to violent oppression, just because all the cards were stacked against him. Whether on the run from the police or after his conviction when he was in prison for all those years on Robben Island, his indomitable conviction that truth and justice were worth the sacrifice never left him - and of course they proved to be the very tools which broke the will of the apartheid government in the end.

In addition to his wonderful humility...

As we think of John the Baptist's great calling from the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord', we get a sense of the Mandela strength of purpose, his determination, his resolve not to compromise with what others took to be normal, something that could be lived with. John the Baptist goes out into the wilderness to free himself from the taint of the system he knew to be evil and he calls the world to repentance.

But from a long way off. The extraordinary thing about Jesus was that his ministry wasn't from 'out there'. He spent virtually all his time in the towns and villages of his day: and while his message was also one of repentance, it was shared from within his friendship base – the twelve disciples or the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. When he disappears into the distant wilderness it is on a needs-only basis.

In addition to his wonderful humility...

Like Jesus Nelson Mandela knew that the chief way to turn people's hearts was when he had built a close relationship of easy trust with them. Apparently he had a great trick of remembering names and faces. Once, as President, he was in a lift with someone he hadn't seen for years. They were lost for words to be so close to this great man. But Nelson Mandela simply turned and smiled. *Hello, he said, do you remember me...?*

And that is one of the things we can try and embrace this Advent: that simple joy and love for those we live and work with so that the Lord of Life can be re-born in us this Christmas – not preaching at people, not shouting out our arguments from the margins, but in the gentle way we live our lives alongside one another, here, where normal life is lived.

And we will find that despite being in very ordinary places, there will be plenty of opportunities to reveal his love, plenty of chances to show his generosity. There is that lovely story of a monk who went to see his abbot, full of indignation: *Father Abbot, he said, when we see brothers falling asleep during the services, should we not arouse them so that they become more watchful?* To which the Abbot replied, *For my part when I see a brother falling asleep, I place his head on my knees and let him rest.*

Don't let us imagine that gentleness means we are not just as determined to stand up for what is right. Gentleness isn't weakness; it is just a different way of being. Like Mandela, like Jesus, our desire to bring down all that is evil and unequal isn't lessened by our refusal to shout and scream, to behave as the world often does – giving in to the powerful and strong and bullying the less demanding. As Henri Nouwen wrote in *'The Road to Daybreak (DLT., 2013), actually being poor is much harder than serving the poor. The unnoticed, unspectacular, unpraised life in solidarity with people who cannot give us anything that makes us feel important is far from attractive. This way is not the easy way of life, but it is God's way for it is the way of the Cross. As a parish I hope that this is the kind of moral influence we strive to offer, relying not on strength of numbers but on our simple desire to do what is right - whatever the cost to ourselves.*