Caritas in Veritate

The hymn to Christ which comprised the second reading this morning, reminds us that the second Person of the Trinity – God the Son – exists eternally. This is the concept of the Logos in Saint John's Gospel – the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

It is this idea on which Pope Benedict draws early in his recent Encyclical, Caritas in Veritate – Love in Truth. Through this Word – this Logos – God speaks His eternal Truth. In so doing, through the Word – dia Logou, in Greek – a dialogue is created between the eternal Truth and the concrete realities of a specific temporal situation.

He goes on to say that it is this dialogue, which ensures that human activity is directed towards a righteous – a Godly end. Without the dialogue, structures, relationships and processes, which are intrinsically morally neutral, become instruments of injustice, oppression … evil. Even acts of charity in its broader sense, bereft of the foundation of Truth, degenerate into misguided sentimentality, often serving to perpetuate the misery to which pity has responded.

His analysis of the recent economic crisis is that it is this very abandonment of dialogue with Truth that has seen if not greed, then pragmatism, corrupt the whole financial system. A pragmatism, which sets the wrong goals for enterprise aims, which are fundamentally flawed and could only lead in the medium term to the catastrophe, which we are witnessing.

The Encyclical has received a surprising degree of support – though not without some criticism – amongst commentators; and yet it is not clear that the principal participants in the drama are minded to change course.

In the first reading, Amaziah tries to banish God's prophet, Amos, from Bethel, the royal Sanctuary – the centre of power in ancient Israel. It is a voice, which is heard today as secularists seek to exclude religious voices from the public realm. There is something a little confusing about the approach that seeks to uphold the Human Rights of people to manifest their religion and freedom of speech by saying that they can only exercise those rights at home. Setting that aside, we Christians should feel an imperative to bring our values to bear on a society: to force a dialogue between people of earthly power and the eternal Truth of our Faith.

The secularist argument is that as all values and ethics are relative, they should be confined to the private sphere. The public realm, they say, should be value neutral ensuring no discrimination or inequitable diminution of human liberty. Yet, at the Pope observes, "… all social action involves a doctrine." The priorities set by government and the choices that are made as to legislation and expenditure all presuppose some set of values.

It is the Pope's view that those values are becoming inadequate for the challenges that we face. He reflects on the explosion of technological advance that the world has seen in the last generation. This exponential increase in our capacity to control the natural world and expand the human activity has led many to believe that we are masters of our own destiny and our developing ethical structure reflects this view.

He suggests that our technological advance has far outstripped our capacity to create a solid moral framework for what we can achieve –

rather in the same way that many a child today knows far more about the nuts and bolts of life than the degree of their emotional development can properly address. Above all, the primacy of justice and human dignity has been toppled by the appetites of what is technologically and financially possible. He warns those in the currently wealthy countries that many even of us will feel the chill effect of this as power, linked to wealth and the control of information, is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.

Contrary to what is frequently postulated, that we have been enriched by the developments of the past few decades, actually, we are slowly being impoverished as our lives are squeezed into frameworks that serve the maximisation of wealth creation and technological innovation, both of which are increasingly masters rather than servants of humanity.

In the dialogue with the world, it is not the Church's role to propose specific economic policies. Rather, our responsibility is to assert the primacy of justice and human dignity in all human enterprise. Our goal is to convert not only individuals, but institutions and structures to this foundation of justice and human dignity from which they can construct their processes and initiatives.

In so doing, we are following in the steps of the Twelve, whom Christ sent out in pairs to cure sickness and cast out devils – to cure the sickness of the present age and banish the evil, which diminishes humanity in the cause of wealth creation and technological advance.

The Twelve were instructed that in towns where people refused to listen to them, they were to shake the dust from their feet. This, perhaps, is the greatest lesson we must learn. When the world refuses to listen to us, the temptation is to listen to the world – at least to a point. We can become

convinced that although we hold to the ideals in theory, in practice they are an unworkable aspiration in the reality of our world. Something of the dust from worldly approaches clings to our shoes, our commitment to the Truth is thereby lessened and our part in the dialogue is compromised.

In his comment on the Pope's Encyclical in yesterday's Financial Times, Christopher Caldwell made the point that most of us have, in one way or another and to some extent, bought into the approach, which landed us in the predicament in which the world now finds itself. It is not globalisation, capitalism or technological advance, which are responsible of themselves for the problem, but the mindset that operates and governs them. It would be an interesting exercise to reflect on what dust we need to shake off our own feet before we can effectively promote the dialogue, which will re–orientate the management of our world.

Richard Deadman