

## University Sermon

OXFORD

Advent Sunday 2011

‘Come let us walk in the light of the Lord’ Isaiah 2.5

Isaiah was talking about Enlightenment.

Now Enlightenment has so often been used to mean something rather different: the movement based on reason and secular knowledge that wanted to be freed from the shackles of theology. With the history of doctrinal disputes and the resulting conflicts that had torn Europe apart, it is not surprising that some people at that time wanted to be free from the shackles of theology.

Things have changed. 40 years ago, 30 years ago, people who knew best said loudly and repeatedly that religion was dead. Some still do. None of them could have foreseen the resurgence of religious belief and faith that has happened in recent years.

His All Holiness Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch, was one of the first religious leaders to say that our present environmental crisis was a spiritual problem. It had been created by human attitudes, not by human ignorance. One could doubtless say the same about our other current problems: human beings now have greater knowledge than ever before, and yet we face unprecedented crises. It could be said that we have created them, that they are the result of a spiritual condition.

‘Come’ said Isaiah, ‘let us walk in the light of the Lord’.

We know very little about this extraordinary man who lived in Jerusalem just before 700 BCE. One of the tasks of a biblical scholar is to discover as much as possible of the original context of the ancient texts, and one of the first things we discover is that nothing similar has survived from that time. An otherwise unknown man looked at the world around him and knew that things had gone badly wrong. He also knew that something better was possible.

How? He believed that the Lord had spoken to him. Other people believed that the Lord had spoken to him, and that is why we still have his words today.

‘Let us walk in the light of the Lord’, he said, and then described the situation in his own society. It sounds rather familiar: the land was full of silver and gold, and treasures without limit. They were making a lot of money from the arms trade - horses and chariots in those days. Women were wearing the latest fashions and cosmetics. There were diviners and soothsayers predicting the future, and it was doubtless one of increased prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah, however, saw his homeland as a place full of idols, and by that he did not just mean statues and images. People were worshipping the work of their own hands, much as happens today. Political and economic systems, the work of our own hands, are the idols of our society, and the market is God.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 2.6-8; 3.18-23.

I remember clearly when I first came across Harvey Cox's now-classic article: 'The Market as God', published in 1999. He described 'business theology'. 'In the new theology' he wrote, 'the celestial pinnacle is occupied by The Market, which I capitalise to signify both the mystery that enshrouds it and the reverence it inspires in business folk... The diviners and seers of the Market's moods are the high priests of its mysteries. To act against their admonitions is to risk excommunication and possible damnation... The Market may work in mysterious ways "hid from our eyes", but ultimately, it knows best'<sup>2</sup>. His analysis was chilling and prophetic, and events in the twelve years since he published the article have only increased its relevance.

Isaiah knew that his society of gold and silver, the arms trade, the fashion industry and diviners from the east would collapse, and only then would people abandon their idols.

The Bible offers a sophisticated account of how things went so wrong. The early Hebrews had a non-philosophical culture, and so their theology is set out in their stories. How things went wrong is told in the story of the garden of Eden: the forbidden fruit and the talking snake.

I sometimes have people say to me: 'Surely you do not believe in a talking snake?' To which I reply: 'No. But I am very interested in what he said.'

The story of the Garden of Eden is often read simply as the story of 'our first disobedience', but that misses the main point. It is a story about disobedience in one particular way: the use of knowledge. The snake did not just tempt to disobedience; he offered a different type of knowledge, and this is what interests me about his words. We are often told that we live in a knowledge-based economy, and I ask myself who or what really owns increasing amounts of this knowledge.

The story says that Adam was allowed to eat from any tree in the garden, so he was intended to eat from the tree of life. The fruit of this tree gave Wisdom. There are many legends around this story, more stories to expand and explain the original story. One says that Satan himself planted the second tree. Then the great deceiver persuaded the human pair to eat from his tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This means he persuaded them to choose secular knowledge without the restraint of the law of the Lord. Liberation ! The snake offered them a tree that looked just like the tree of life, but with the additional promise of choice. The human pair could choose. They could choose how to use their knowledge -- and once evil was a possibility, it soon became a reality.

As the great deceiver said, they became like gods; and then, the storyteller said, 'they knew they were naked'. The rich hinterland of legend here reveals that they had originally been clothed with garments of wisdom, but when they chose the wrong tree, they lost that God-given wisdom. *And they knew they were naked.*

Now Wisdom, despite the conclusions of some recent biblical scholarship, was not a secular discipline. *It was the God-given knowledge and attitude to knowledge that joined all things together in harmony.*

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<sup>2</sup> The Atlantic, March 1999.

There is another version of the Eden story, less well-known than the one in Genesis. The prophet Ezekiel<sup>3</sup> described a royal figure who was driven from Eden because of corruption. He had been created wise - those garments of wisdom - but increased trade had led him to violence, and his wisdom had been corrupted for the sake of what Ezekiel called 'splendour'. He lost everything. Distortion and unrighteous trade led him to dishonour what had been holy, and so he was turned to ashes.

*Things have not changed.*

Isaiah felt called to speak out: 'Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.'

But what was meant, *what is meant*, by walking in the light of the Lord?

The people of Isaiah's time had a world-view shaped by the temple in Jerusalem, which represented the whole creation, both visible and invisible. They believed that the visible creation drew its very life from the invisible creation, which they described as the divine light. When people broke the bond between heaven and earth - when they lost the light - they believed that the visible creation and human society would collapse and wither away. Isaiah described this in one of his visions: the earth mourns and withers, he warned, because its inhabitants have broken the bonds that bound them to eternity.<sup>4</sup> They had lost the light of the Lord.

Isaiah also had a vision of what the future could be, and those words are now written on a wall near the United Nations building in New York.

They shall beat their swords into ploughshares  
And their spears into pruning hooks;  
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation  
Neither shall they learn war any more.

Elsewhere, in yet another vision, he saw a peaceful world, full of the knowledge of the Lord. This does not mean a world full of theology! It means knowledge gained, held and used in the light of the Lord.

All knowledge is acquired by years of study and discipline. There are no short cuts. But once acquired, knowledge brings huge responsibility to those who have it. That new god, The Market, now determines more and more what knowledge will be acquired and how it will be used. Those who walk in the light of the Lord must never lose sight of this alternative theology that has been foisted upon us. Those who walk in the light of The Market will cast a great shadow.

Our gospel reading today was the warning about the master's unexpected return, and the exhortation to keep our lamps burning. How necessary that warning is. In this season of Advent we think especially of the world in darkness waiting for the light that came into the

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<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 28. 12-19.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 24.4.

world at Christmas, the light of the Lord. In the words of St John, ‘The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.’<sup>5</sup>

In a dark and darkening world, we are called to keep our lamps burning, because as Christians, we have to keep visible the light of the Lord. And nowhere is this more needed than in a great centre of knowledge, where we have to show, *constantly*, that it is possible to maintain the highest standards of scholarly discipline whilst walking in the light of the Lord. We must pray for a new Enlightenment.

‘Come’, said Isaiah, ‘let us walk in the light of the Lord’

Or, as others have said: *Dominus illuminatio mea.*

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<sup>5</sup> John 1.9.