

'The lost, the outcast, the overcome...'

St John the Baptist's Day Sermon, Sunday 24 June 2012

Preached in Magdalen College, Oxford University by the Revd Duncan Dormor, President and Dean, St John's College, Cambridge.

In his book, *The Victim*, written in 1947, the Jewish American writer, Saul Bellow, tells the story of one Asa Leventhal, who is subject to a dangerous stalker: Kirkby. Economically times are hard and Kirkby has fallen headlong through the cracks of respectable society – he has lost his job and his house; his wife has left him; and consumed with self pity and fatalism he has taken to the bottle. Kirkby has sought out Asa because he blames him for the loss of his job that initiated the decline. Despite his natural prickliness and clear conviction that he is not guilty, Asa is strangely vulnerable to Kirkby's claims and lets the rantings of the stalker get right inside his head – and indeed Kirby inside his flat. Asa then begins his own decline into mild paranoia, and starts to brood not just about his putative responsibility for the other's misfortune, but also about whether his own relative good fortune is a result of his own effort, whether he is a self-made man or whether it all comes down to chance, so he comes to turning over in his head a phrase:

*'I was lucky, I got away with it...'*

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By which he means, of course, that in difficult times, he was not to be numbered among that *'...part of humanity, the part that did not get away with it – the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced.'*

Over the last couple of years and especially in recent months, the existential predicament of the fictional Asa has become a reality in the Western world in ways that have not been seen for decades. We are aware that increasing numbers of people in Southern Europe are *'not getting away with it'* or are re-experiencing previously taken-for-granted stability as luck or good fortune. A powerful new searchlight has been shone on what previously only a handful of professionals understood by the expression 'paths into homelessness', and like Asa, people have become conscious that they stand to lose not just material security or membership of respectable society, but also the whole edifice upon which a happy, fulfilled and dignified life is built. They stand to lose what psychologists would describe as 'ontological security': that positive orientation to life; that usually unquestioned and unspoken assurance that the world is a stable and meaningful place.

In laying bare the existential vulnerability of one man at the mercy of larger economic forces, Saul Bellow's novel also makes it clear, of course, that certain sorts of people are 'luckier' than others, or more accurately that 'chance' plays much less of a role than people would like to think. Asa is *'lucky to get away with in'* in part because he is a Jew in a world dominated by Anglo-Saxon Protestants, most of whom are not 'lucky', but buffered from disaster by their class or status, their well-established family or money, or all of these things.

At one level Bellow's novel is a comment on what has come to be known as the 'American Dream', the notion that that nation fosters the genuine worth of each and every woman and man irrespective of their origins; blind to their class, ethnicity or status, and insists that there are no barriers: sheer hard work and pure talent being the only route to the top. The 'American Dream' is of course only the most self-conscious expression of a range of mythic political imaginings which seek to provide a sense of belonging and togetherness, commitment and shared identity. Such

ideas, like that of 'one Nation', the 'classless society' or the good old British 'fair play' are essential to the harmony of nation-states but also carry an implicit notion of equitable dealing amongst all citizens.

Such unifying ideas are important for the stability and coherence of social life, but Bellow is not alone in drawing attention to the distance between the rhetoric and the reality. So for example, the provenance of the idea that for 99% the American Dream remains inaccessible, idle reverie, lies with another American novelist, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the title of his more famous book has recently been co-opted to describe, what has been dubbed as 'the Gatsby Curve'. The Gatsby curve is the work of President Obama's chief economist, Alan Krueger and describes the relationship between social mobility (or the lack of it) and the degree of income inequality within a society. The result is a fairly straightforward positive correlation which shows that the most unequal societies in terms of income distribution have the lowest levels of social mobility. The US and the UK sit very much at the top end of the graph, as among the most unequal and most static societies in 'The West'.

For those who pay close attention - to the well-over-inflation increase in leading City salaries, or who contemplate the alleged benefits of London as a haven for the world's super-rich, or who observe that in an economic slump, the wealth of those who make the Sunday Times Rich list has reached unprecedented heights, or note the fact that opportunities for certain forms of tax avoidance only become available when you reach a particular income threshold - the Gatsby curve comes as no great surprise, but it does deal a body-blow to the idea that we in the UK and elsewhere might 'all be in it together'.

The realities of distributive justice are central to our national life and to the common good of which they form an integral part. They touch upon the question: What sort of a people do we wish to be?

Which brings me to the curious person of John the Baptist, who, in this extraordinarily different world of 2012, we are gathered to reflect upon today. For it is exactly the 'sort of people', the identity and character of the nation, that is at stake with this curious individual. For John, like Jesus, takes his stand firmly within a prophetic tradition of solidarity with those who do not *'get away with it, with 'the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, or in the refrain of scripture, with 'the widow, the fatherless or the stranger in the land'.*

The scriptures present a passionate vision of justice for all and its prophetic tradition rails against the exploitation by the rich and powerful of the poor and vulnerable. It is consistently sceptical about the wealthy, alive to the danger of money becoming one's 'first love', and it places a clear responsibility on the rich to look after and care for the poor. In its cry for greater distributive justice, the prophetic tradition of the Bible calls for judgement and for moral renewal amongst those who are powerful and rich. And unlike some of the self-serving and naïve accounts that circulate today, the biblical writers do not see money as the clean, discrete, amoral force it is frequently purported to be (and certainly not in the absence of robust forms of restraint or morally infused customs and habits). Rather the biblical account understands poverty to be a complex form of disempowerment, and, at the other end of the spectrum, it also recognises, though it wouldn't frame it in this way, that the various forms of what we might call 'capital' – cultural, educational, social, political, as well as economic, are very easily exchanged to shore-up and buttress privilege, and, further that, in the absence of other constraints it is the powerful who rule on, or profoundly influence, where the 'snakes' and 'ladders' in social and political life are placed: As the revelations about the (alleged) influence of the Murdochs' on our political life demonstrate.

This situation is exacerbated by the prestige and ever-increasing sphere within which market thinking is allowed to operate, a theme documented by the Harvard political philosopher, Michael Sandel, in his recent book, *What money can't buy: The moral limits of markets*, which argues, through a range of illuminating examples, the ways in which money has become the predominant measure of social and not just economic value.

One unfortunate consequence of such developments is that people from different backgrounds, classes and status groups live increasingly separate lives, in silos, as management-speak would have it. Given that there is a deep human desire for self-justification and that we all have a natural tendency to believe that 'What You See. (What I See) is All There Is', then, we, especially the 'privileged we' can easily come to believe the claim, or more likely simply imply through our actions and choices, that we are indeed self-made men and women; that we fully deserve to be where we are, for we have made it by ourselves, by our own efforts. We become oblivious to both luck and the lottery of the circumstances of our birth, the state of our health, or a myriad other things which go to make up the pedestal upon which our achievement and self-regard is founded.

Which brings me finally and more specifically to 'The Baptist': For John's mission is to purify the nation of Israel; it is a levelling call, for he demands that all people need to repent, that even the elite need to be stripped of their status, to remove the clothes of moral and religious legitimacy with which the powerful always tend to wrap themselves, to cast off the presumptuous idea that they are the true heirs, the proper 'children of Israel', and to commit themselves to the radically inclusive vision of God, for whom all: prostitute, politician and priest are equally children of the one Father. So John denounces the exclusionary claims to power and privilege of the religious and political elite, in his case those members of the two elite sects, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who queue up with the rest: denouncing them as the children of vipers and leaving them in no doubt about their need for repentance,

The prophetic tradition of John with its radical vision and its denial of special privileges stands then as a source of morally renewable energies for our world today providing a powerful counterpoint to the dominant ideology of ownership and to the idolatry of money, but it can also act as a stimulus for independent institutions, not least those that educate and not least those like Magdalen College which provocatively bears the name of one who was counted among '*the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced*'. May this College and University ever remember such as these in thought, word and deed. Amen