

Proper 19 16th September 2006

The epistle readings for the last few weeks have all been from James and a fortnight ago, one of them struck a chord as it started, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters.” Well, I have just taken that advice, and finished my job as a teacher to take on one with the Local Education Authority which is somewhat less frenetic and allows me a bit of time and energy for other things. So far, it’s going pretty well, but I may have cause to keep you posted with other reflections when I’m here in a few months time.

But because of this move, I have found myself talking to quite a variety of people about lifestyle and what is important, and clearly there are quite a few amongst my former colleagues and other associates who would like a saner life. And soon after I started this job, I opened my newspaper’s weekend magazine, I found an essay on just this topic. Of course, it may be that it is just Guardian readers who are interested in this sort of thing, but somehow, I doubt it.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,,1873221,00.html>

It’s quite a radical essay, but there are several nice points in it.

“Banish ...” This is the idea that crime and terrorism are actually used by the authorities to justify control of the population – you can tell where the author is coming from, but isn’t it true that anxiety about these things makes us mistrustful and insular in our outlook?

“Break the ...” the notion that you can work all day to make money which you then spend to be expensively entertained – do things, he suggests.

“Cast off your watch” takes to task the notion that time is money – time is time, to be enjoyed, and if your schedule isn’t full, well, potter a bit.

“Do your own housework” – there’s pleasure in humble work, and a quote from DH Lawrence, “no man is free who depends on servants”

“In praise of melancholy” .. no-one can be happy all the time, feeling a bit fed-up isn’t the end of the world.

“Escape debt” highly topical this – are we really a whole lot better off with all the credit available to us?

All good fun, and fairly provocative stuff, but I find myself in tune with a lot of it. I found it strangely reminiscent of a book that was very popular in evangelical circles a couple of decades ago – “Celebration ...” a book which

tries to explain and re-connect to the classic spiritual disciplines in order to find true joy in life. Expand..

So, as Jesus said, whoever is not against us is for us – is this an indication that getting out of the rat race is all it takes? Well no, for this article is not a Christian text and the biggest problem for me comes in one short paragraph. “Say no ..” I’ll read it verbatim because it seems to me to exemplify the extent to which religious notions are easily misunderstood or misrepresented.... Somehow we have a knack of taking the best teaching and using it to the worst ends.

Lower our moral standards because we feel a bit of guilt? There’s confusion here between guilt and feeling guilty. Of course my feeling guilty isn’t going to make anything better – if I am guilty then perhaps I can do something to make reparation, but if I can’t and I still feel bad, that isn’t suffering in the sense that Jesus meant it.

When I re-read this article, I still enjoyed it, but when I asked what might a Christian perspective add to it, the answer seemed to be “other people” When we listen to our readings, it is clear that both James and Jesus himself saw faithfulness as leading to care and concern for others, - not just a life of simplicity, making things easy and rewarding for ourselves, but with a clear purpose beyond ourselves – the purpose of the gospel, which is good news for everyone. This is reflected in some of the later disciplines – corporate disciplines of service, worship and celebration. We don’t want to stop the world, we are called to contribute to it positively.

Isaiah said “the Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may sustain the weary with a word” Perhaps it’s the case that we are all teachers, that our approach to life and what matters is what speaks about Jesus to other people. To take the example of giving a cup of water, - in modern terms this may mean that we show hospitality and take an interest in people. To finish with another paradox from Martin Luther “A Christian man is the most free Lord of all, and subject to none. A Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”