

Ely Cathedral October 2008

I am reliably informed by the Canon Missioner that today is Micah Sunday, with its clarion call to all right thinking people to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Of course, being a mere jobbing parson I have to confess that I had never heard of Micah Sunday before, but being naturally anxious to be fed and watered by the said Canon after this service, I now make it the theme for my address, and begin with a quotation - who said this?

We are “small, and in relation to our great mission small minded; we are poor; and we are collectively...inactive; we are suspicious of help, and exclusive...” Now while you may feel that these words might have been said by virtually any parish priest at work in the Church of England today, they were actually uttered by H.G. Wells on 6 January 1906, and the object of his ire was in fact the Fabian Society. Wells had been converted to socialism under the aesthetic influence of Blake, Carlyle and Ruskin, and he became a great fan of George Bernard Shaw, who was ten years older than Wells. To begin with Shaw was like an elder brother to Wells, and through Shaw Wells got to know Sidney and Beatrice Webb and the Fabian set. Of Wells Ford Madox Ford could write “It did not take us long to recognise that here was Genius... and all great London lay prostrate at his feet.” Shaw was similarly warm in his praise, arguing that Wells spoke directly to the people, and “was our nearest to a twentieth century Dickens”.

But Wells was a lifelong escapist. He was only able to endure the claustrophobia of marriage after he had set up an alternative household with a mistress and could oscillate between the two homes. And no sooner had he joined the Fabians than he wanted to leave them. So he got into fighting mode, and decided to slay Shaw, his elder brother in the socialist faith. He complained that Shaw had encouraged the Fabians “to fall in with an assumed pretence that this grave high business of Socialism, to which it would be a small offering for us to give all our lives, is an idiotic middle-class joke.” If you replaced the word Socialism in that quotation with the word Christianity, then hey presto! You’ve got yourself a first class Micah Sunday rant!

Shaw, for his part, was impressed, and wrote “Wells was born cleverer than anybody within hail of him”, but then went on: “He was probably stuffed with sweets and smothered with kisses...The world that other men of genius had to struggle with, and which sometimes starved them dead, came to him and licked his boots. He did what he liked; and when he did not like what he had done, he threw it aside and tried something else.” Shaw knew nothing of the illnesses and insecurities of Wells’ early years. He simply saw, in contrast to himself, someone who had “never missed a meal, never wandered through the streets without a penny to his name, never had to wear seedy clothes, never was unemployed.” And now he was being fussed over by the whole family of Fabians.

The matter came to a head with two well attended public meetings where both men addressed the troops. After a one all draw in the first meeting, an even larger crowd turned up for the return match. At nine o’clock in the evening Shaw rose to speak. Between the two meetings Wells had been asked to work with a Committee to look at how the Fabians conducted their business. “During his Committee’s deliberations Mr Wells produced a book on America”, Shaw told his audience. “And a very good book

too. But whilst I was drafting our reply I produced a play.” Shaw paused and there was silence. S.G. Hobson in the audience noticed how Shaw’s eyes were vacantly glancing round the ceiling. “It really seemed that he had lost his train of thought”, Hobson remembered. “When we were all thoroughly uncomfortable, he resumed: “Ladies and gentlemen: I paused there to enable Mr Wells to say “And a very good play too!”” The meeting dissolved into laughter, no one laughing louder or longer than Wells himself. As a result, the chairman took it for granted that the Wells amendment had been withdrawn. “Keats was snuffed out by an article”, commented Hobson; “Wells was squelched by a joke.”

Throughout history, of course, people have come together, forged alliances and friendships, and then fallen out. It happens on the grand scale of competing nation states; it happens to groups and societies; it happens at work and at home. It happens. But it should never be used as a perennial get out clause which enables us to avoid hard questions and tough challenges. And that surely is where the rubber of Micah Sunday hits the road. This call to look beyond our own immediate needs and to consider the needs of the poor and the dispossessed will never be a big vote winner. It will never prevail over humankind’s incipient self interest. After all, I hear you thinking, we are in the middle of a major credit crunch and banking crisis. How on earth can we be expected to think about the poor and dispossessed. The way things are going, we shall soon all be the poor and dispossessed! But we of all people should be prepared to open our hearts and to actively seek to promote justice for the powerless and the poor.

In the case of Wells and the Fabians, the aims were noble. The intention was a fine one. But once people get involved in a noble cause, stuff happens. Anyone who works in a Cathedral Chapter knows all about that. But our inherent failings and weaknesses are never enough to prevent a genuine desire to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

The real key, of course, is the ultimate form of joined up thinking. It is to appreciate that we probably won’t be able to act justly and love mercy if we neglect a humble walk with our God. That beautiful and much neglected virtue of humility is surely the key. Because it’s to do with a certain kind of earthiness. It’s about being grounded in our relationship with God so that we then want to do the basic and important stuff. We want justice. We want to be merciful. Because we know just how much God has forgiven us and has taken us on, warts and all. It’s a relief to learn that God loves us and accepts us and forgives us. And once we experience some of these things then issues of justice move away from the merely theoretical, and become issues that are beautifully possible. Amen.

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