

ST JAMES' CHURCH, KING STREET, SYDNEY

Sermon to the Charles Dickens Fellowship Conference 2018

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'The Best and Worst of Times'

Readings: Micah 6: 1-8; 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31.

Charles Dickens is remembered as one of the greatest English novelists, especially because of his capacity to create characters and accurately describe society and provide a critique of its failings. It is for this reason I have chosen a well-known quote that is a demonstration of the timelessness of his narrative; as applicable to our own times as his.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."

In this way, Charles Dickens commenced his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. His story went on to describe the horrors of regime change in late eighteenth century France. As it came to pass, the **French Revolution** of 1789 gave rise to one of the most radical changes in world history – the development of the 'modern world order' in which we still live.

With the Revolution came great philosophical, cultural and political changes such as the creation of representative democracy and rapid developments in science and technology. This new understanding of the world provided not only an enhanced system of evaluating knowledge but also a means of informing belief.

The French Revolution signalled the end of both absolute monarchy and Christendom in Europe. In time, it gave rise to a form of 'rule by the people' known as representative democracy, a system that is now as revered in many parts of the world as Christendom was before it. But the Revolution also created political instability that swung back and forth through the reign of terror, two empires, the restoration of monarchy, and three republics; much of which was achieved with considerable violence and bloodshed.

This was also known as the **Age of Enlightenment** demonstrated through an abiding faith in the power of human reason and goodness to transform the world. If humanity could unlock the laws of the universe (God's own laws), then why should it not also discover the laws underlying all aspects of nature and society? People came to assume that through the use of reason a never-ending progress would be made possible in the matters of knowledge, scientific achievement and moral value. Yet, it was not to be so. The expectation of perpetual progress was to be lost through poverty, inequality and injustice arising from untrammelled industrialisation and the brutality of colonialism and slavery. Moreover, it was to come to grief on the battlefields of two world wars and the Great Depression of the twentieth century.

Finally, despite belief in an ever-improving world, the holocaust of the Second World War proved that humanity was no better than it had ever been before. Carl von Clausewitz, (a Prussian soldier and intellectual), said over a century before: 'war is only politics by other means'; however, six million Jews, Gypsies and other marginalised people died at the hands of the Nazis because of this political point. It thereby reminded us that the modern world is not so enlightened after all.

Dickens lived, worked and wrote in this nineteenth century context as Europe transitioned from monarchy to democracy. He was a critic of the injustices of his age and of the poverty that it caused. He was also critical of any kind of extremism, including that to be found in religion. Indeed, in matters of religion he was much like most of the population by observing a moderate, private and simple form of the Christian faith. He was certainly not an Evangelical but then neither was he a Catholic.

Interestingly, it was in the family circle that his faith was to be discovered, especially through the education of his children. For them he produced a simplified version of the gospels called *The Life of Our Lord* from which I quoted at the beginning of this service. He likewise wrote simple prayers for his children to recite.

If Dickens had any religious zeal, then it was to be seen in his desire to expose hypocrisy and corruption; which would have placed him closer to Jesus and further away from the Archbishop of Canterbury.

I would have thought that Dickens might well have approved of the words of the prophet Micah, from today's first reading:

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of You but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

The Old Testament prophets often railed against their societies in which there was abuse, suffering and injustice. Recognising the evil that people can do to one another, they reminded the community of God's covenant, a covenant that has obligations with both inward and outward dimensions.

This theme is echoed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount where he argues that true faith is more a matter of the heart than the outward show of piety. Jesus challenged his listeners to keep the spirit of the law on the one hand, and also to show justice and mercy on the other. Such a challenge has both personal and corporate dimensions. As God's people, we are called to love God and each other with a love that is unconditional and consistent. Moreover, as a community we are called to be just and merciful. These are two expressions of much the same thing.

Justice is a communal thing that integrates inter-personal love into the life of the wider society. If we are to be proclaimers of good-news, then we also need to live it. Seeking justice is the way that we turn a loving personal response to God into a corporate activity extending out into the world.

It also partly answers the question of 'why do bad things happen to good people?' By acknowledging the propensity of human beings to perform evil, the question then turns into a cry for justice - a call to see, respond and act.

As Christians, we take the narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection as the sign of the new relationship between God and us in which God promises to be with us in all circumstances. We therefore 'carry our cross', which means we 'die to self' thereby receiving new life and empowerment to bring this same dynamic into the life of the wider world. The mystery here is that when we change the world also changes.

God therefore calls us to be authentic people who believe and live out the presence of Christ in the world through the community of faith. All these things are acts of grace, which is God's love active in the world; for where goes grace there goes God's Kingdom.

We therefore need not fear the world because God is present in it, actively seeking to draw people to himself. The tyrant, the bully, the greedy manipulator may often seem to prevail but nevertheless there is ultimate justice in God. Evil and suffering may come but we have the opportunity to respond in love, bringing transformation and hope into people's lives and thereby continuing to exercise the ministry of Jesus in the world today.

God's people are therefore called to be faithful and to seek what we need to do in our own times. It may lead us into new territory and the entertainment of things that have not been done before – the best and worst of times! Indeed, it is risky and painful but necessary (as the idea of resurrection reminds us), but it will always be about love and justice.