

# Sermon

'This is still the hour of liberty'

13 Sept 2020, Ex 14.19-31, Mt 18.21-35



My wife and I are rewatching 'The west wing' at the moment. I think it is fair to say that it is one of our all time favourite television shows. You may have seen it? In a recent episode, the aides to the American President are in a room with a number of church leaders, when the question is asked: does anyone even know what the first commandment is any more? At which President Bartlett, a Catholic, and the leader of the free world, bursts into the room, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall worship no other gods but me.'

The worship of God is the key to human freedom. And writing in the 4th century the church father Augustine, in seeing God's purposes for peace in human society, declared that there can be no peace in society where there is no worship of God.

As human beings we long for peace. But social peace depends on religious unity. For most of its history, the peace and unity of western society, was provided by Christianity. Anyone who has visited Europe will see this. Its many cathedrals and churches stand today as testimony to this.

However, with religious war in the 16th and 17th centuries, the unity of human society based on religious unity came to an end. And with that, peace among men.

So that the political task of Christianity today remains a hoped for return to social peace and human harmony, based on religious unity within the Christian religion.

According to Wolfhart Pannenberg, the leading Christian theologian of the past 50 years, 'Western societies stand in desperate need of renewal and revision of their

religious heritage where the roots of their modern beginnings are found. The contribution of the Christian faith to contemporary democratic society must first of all consist in creating an awareness of these Christian origins of modern democracy and a recognition of democratic freedom as the expression of the Christian spirit, in order to involve democracy with this source from which it sprang. The USA is the society which corresponds most closely to this because it is 'distinguished by a high degree of agreement concerning the value of freedom based on Christian principles'. Along with other Western democracies, it exhibits the 'basic contention that the individual must remain the goal and standard of the systems of society.'

'This is still the hour of the principle of liberty', he wrote in 1977. 'And of a continuous calling for its realisation, in all dimensions of human life. But the ambiguities of its secular conception deprived the idea of liberty of its holistic meaning to such an extent that judgment on the societies based on that principle is already looming on the horizon. This judgment obviously appears in the rise of socialism. This ambiguous word may be taken as referring to the subordination in principle of the individual under some accepted image of society.'

According to Pannenberg, there are a number of good reasons why Christians cannot use socialism as a tool to understand oppression within western society. The first is that it alienates people from God, depriving them of their God-given individuality, and human dignity. The second is that it sets the creation above the Creator, failing to recognize the problem of human sin as pride. Third, it is unscientific, as its historically false prediction of the demise of the middle class has shown. Finally, empirically, its socialist revolutions have erected authoritarian and repressive regimes that are among the worst of the 20th century, sacrificing millions

to their cause. 'In the end,' Pannenberg concludes, 'all who engage in this movement turn out to be victims of the seductive power of an ideology.'

Jesus said if the Son makes you free you shall be free indeed. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Human society, depends on freedom, a freedom that comes only from God.

A society, and a freedom, that is strengthened, by forgiveness.

To err is human. To forgive divine.

'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy seven times.'